

**DECISION MEMO  
USDA Forest Service**

**Fiscal Year 2004-2005 Prescribed Burning Program**

**HOMOCHITTO NATIONAL FOREST  
Adams, Amite, Copiah, Franklin, Lincoln,  
Jefferson, and Wilkinson Counties, of Mississippi**

**DECISION:**

I have decided to implement the fiscal year 2004-2005 Prescribed Burning Program as described during scoping. This Program consists of prescribed burning areas widely distributed across the District in Adams, Amite, Copiah, Franklin, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Wilkinson Counties, Mississippi. This program consists of applying a prescribed burn to approximately 84,286 acres for fuel reduction and associated wildlife benefits over a two-year period. Burns will be organized and implemented by Burning Block, which is an area where prescribed fire can be readily controlled and where similar management considerations such as smoke management apply. The tables below show summaries of the two years' proposals.

**Table 1. Acres of Proposed Prescribed Burning, by Season**

<b>Year/Season</b>	<b>Dormant Season</b>	<b>Growing Season</b>	<b>Either Season</b>
<b>FY 2004</b>	27,034	12,112	
<b>FY 2005</b>	23,719	12,355	9,062

**Table 2. Burning Blocks and Acres Proposed**

<b>Block #</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>FY04 Season</b>	<b>Block #</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>FY05 Season</b>
3	319	Dormant	1	329	Dormant
4	901	Dormant	2	581	Dormant
6	1,500	Dormant	5	1,422	Dormant
9	432	Dormant	7	997	Either
13	931	Dormant	10	954	Dormant
14	1,429	Dormant	11	122	Either
15	751	Dormant	12	1,886	Dormant
20	2,008	Dormant	16	2,023	Dormant
22	1,778	Dormant	18	4,168	Growing
24	2,524	Growing	19	1,877	Dormant
26	2,873	Dormant	19	142	Either
29	2,237	Growing	21	1,993	Dormant
36	2,832	Dormant	23	2,083	Either
37	804	Growing	25	2,691	Dormant
40	2,116	Growing	30	1,629	Dormant
41	522	Dormant	31	785	Growing
42	2,841	Dormant	32	1,910	Growing
44	2,543	Growing	34	480	Dormant
46	1,966	Dormant	34	152	Dormant

<b>Block #</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>FY04 Season</b>	<b>Block #</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>FY05 Season</b>
50	1,888	Growing	35	1,119	Growing
51	3,474	Dormant	38	1,114	Dormant
54	1,350	Dormant	39	3,079	Either
55	523	Dormant	43	1,990	Growing
57	607	Dormant	45	1,930	Dormant
			47	1,317	Growing
			48	2,311	Dormant
			49	1,646	Dormant
			52	704	Dormant
			53	2,641	Either
			56	1,066	Growing
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>39,148</b>		<b>Totals:</b>	<b>45,138</b>	

All acreages approximate

The proposed years and seasons of burn shown above are not static, but dynamic. That is, conditions may result in particular blocks being burned in a different season or a different year than initially planned. No listed burning block has received two consecutive growing season burns, nor are any proposed at this time to be burned at less than 18-month intervals. Initiation of a burn will be dependent on the determination that a combination of weather and site conditions will meet site-specific burning plan parameters for each individual burning area. These conditions are monitored daily throughout the burning season, and the district will take advantage of suitable burning days as they occur. The burning season for southwest Mississippi generally begins in December and is carried out on suitable days through July, however, prescribed burning at other times is possible depending on site and weather conditions.

This decision is categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment in accordance with Chapter 3 of FSH 1909.15, section 31.2, Category 8. Extraordinary circumstances as defined in FSH 1909-15 do not exist.

**SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT:**

On September 25, 2003 scoping began on the fiscal year 2004-2005 Prescribed Burning Program. Initial scoping consisted of identification of internal issues and developing a list of potentially interested publics. A letter describing the project, was mailed to 49 individuals, organizations and agencies who had either expressed interest in similar projects, or were thought to be potentially interested in our prescribed burning program. A copy of the mailing list is attached to this Decision Memo. Additionally, to reach out to as wide an audience as possible, a short project prescription and request for comment was published in four local newspapers and the Jackson, MS Clarion-Ledger (Paper of Record). These notices were used to identify interested publics in addition to those on our established mailing list. Attached to the letter describing the project was a general map of the proposed burn areas as they were distributed across the district. Both the letters and the public notices offered to provide site maps of specific areas upon request.

No responses were received from public scoping of this project.

### **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS:**

Projects are analyzed based on impacts, not size. Individual areas are burned singly over time, not as a continuous large block. The outcomes of the activities associated with prescribed burning are well known and of such limited impact that they would not produce significant direct effects, or cumulative effects. The basis for these relationships is that fire influence represents the historic norm for the areas to be treated under this decision. As such, burning represents a habitat and forest community maintenance activity, which occurs periodically, and not a new or “one-time” project that substantially alters ecological relationships. There is some potential for individual tree loss or damage. However, while individual dominant or co-dominant trees could be damaged or killed, such occurrences are rare in wildlife and fuels reduction burning. Similar natural losses occurred historically. It would be difficult to establish an expectation of potential significance that would trigger analysis in an environmental assessment when viewed in relationship to the many thousands of trees within the prescribed areas.

This project is consistent with Forest Service management direction and the National Forests in Mississippi Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended. The following circumstances were considered consistent with projects categorically excluded under Forest Service Environmental Policies and Procedures Handbook 1909.15

- Roads will not be built. The Forest Service will use existing roads to access the sites proposed for prescribed burning.
- There are no endangered species present that would be affected. Most plants and animals found in the burning blocks are adapted to periodic low to medium intensity fires. Prescribed burning is recommended to maintain red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) habitat, and RCW cavity trees will be protected during the prescribed fire. The Biological Evaluation prepared for this project concluded that this project would not be likely to have an adverse effect on threatened or endangered species.
- Plowed firelines to be used in this project have been surveyed by an archaeologist, who determined these actions to have no impact on cultural resources. The firelines for the burns planned in FY04 have been cleared by the Archeologists: There is a certain level of variability in future fireline location due to natural events such as windstorms. To ensure protection of cultural resources, each individual burn plan, with line locations, will be subject to approval by the Archeologist, and the entire burning program will be reviewed each year. Cultural resources are protected by moving control lines when sites are encountered, avoiding impacts and thus the need for mitigation. Hand lines and other minimal-impact methods of fireline construction will be used in sensitive areas. This would remove only litter and organic material from a narrow path and not substantially disturb mineral soils.
- No part of this project is congressionally designated as wilderness.
- There are no administratively designated areas such as Roadless Areas or Research Natural Areas within the area affected by the project.

In addition to the potential for extraordinary circumstances, a number of other considerations can be mitigated below “significance”.

- Soil protection is assured by bladeing rather than plowing lines, providing drainage for constructed fire lines, the use of hand lines on steep slopes and revegetation where necessary protect soil and watershed values. Site productivity is maintained.
- By retaining soil on site, and not actively burning riparian areas, watershed values are maintained. Fire is allowed to back into, and burn at low intensity in these areas. This is representative of natural processes.
- The scoping process yielded no civil rights-related issues. Generally, residency is low in the vicinity of burning units, and the distribution of families does not vary from area norms. Burning plans consider wind direction for smoke management and every effort is made to notify area residents. The district keeps a notification list for individuals with respiratory difficulties. No communities or individuals are singled out or adversely impacted based upon civil rights issues such as race color, religion, etc. No impacts could be identified which singled out identifiable groups based upon the design of the project or community habitation patterns. “Burning the woods” is part of the areas cultural history and is not a change or alteration of the local life style.
- Plant and animal species of the area utilize and are often benefited by periodic fires. Sufficient unburned inclusions remain for riparian or mesic associations. In addition, more than 90,000 acres distributed across the District do not receive scheduled burns. There is sufficient unburned area to provide for communities that are not fire dependent.

Based on this analysis, extraordinary circumstances as defined in FSH 1909-15 do not exist. Further, no other potential resource concerns are elevated to potential significance as defined under the National Environmental Policy Act. The outcome of activities associated with this project is well known and of such limited impact that they will not produce lasting or cumulative effects. Therefore, this decision is categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment in accordance with Chapter 3 of FSH 1909.15, section 31.2, Category 6. Implementation of this plan may begin immediately.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND CIVIL RIGHTS**

Civil rights impact analysis is an integrated requirement for projects falling under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) including those projects that qualify for categorical exclusion. This project is located solely on National Forest land. During internal scoping, the interdisciplinary team could not identify any direct effects that single out individuals or groups including those defined as minorities or other identified categories. The Homochitto National Forest has had a continuing prescribed burning program for several years. There is no expected change in the work done or who performs it. There is no change in the way supplies are obtained from vendors or the opportunity to supply the Forest Service with these materials. Any contract work related to this project would be offered through a bidding process that provides equal opportunity to all individuals, organizations and businesses authorized to live, work and/or operate in the United States.

No social issues of any type were identified through during scoping. There is no record of an environmental justice issue being identified through public scoping on any Homochitto recreation or vegetation project prepared under the current Forest Plan. The absence of effects or issues leads to the conclusion that civil rights and environmental justice impacts do not occur as a result of this project, and that additional analysis is not necessary.

**MITIGATION MEASURES AND MONITORING:**

Pre-planned burning parameters mitigate impacts on soil, water, and air quality by protecting the soil organic layers and providing for appropriate smoke management. Specific wind and temperature parameters limit scorch to acceptable prescribed levels. Open system roads and highways are used as fire lines to the extent possible. In-woods lines would be bladed to minimize soil disturbance. Hand lines are used on steep slopes and as lines approach stream banks. Because of the existing forest road network, road construction and/or reconstruction are not needed for this project. As necessary, lines would be restored or treated to reduce erosion with water-bars, mulching, or seeding.

In general, fire is set on ridges and upper slopes, and then allowed to back downhill at lower intensity and become extinguished in the moister areas. This mimics historic natural fire events and results in a natural distribution of vegetation based on fire tolerance. Burns would be conducted only when state issued burning permits are available. This insures compliance with National, Regional, and State air quality and smoke management guidelines

Monitoring is utilized before, during, and after burning. The decision whether or not to start a prescribed burn on any given day is based on current and predicted weather conditions taken from fuel sticks posted at various field locations; local weather station data; and National Weather Service data and predictions. A test fire is initiated before committing the entire block to a burn to ensure that the weather and site variables will produce the desired intensity of fire. On-site weather is taken hourly, and the district weather station collects data throughout the burn. Burn characteristics such as flame height are monitored continuously. On-site conditions are recorded hourly on the burning plan. Post-burn evaluations are conducted to determine effectiveness in achieving burn objectives and the results of resource protection measures. All monitoring information is recorded in the burning plan package.

**APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES:**

This decision is not subject to appeal under 36CFR 215.12, and may be implemented immediately.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

For additional information concerning this decision, written request may be submitted to District Ranger, USDA-Forest Service, 1200 Hwy. 184 East, Meadville, MS. 39653. Information may be obtained by phone by contacting Jay Pittman or Charles Price, (601) 384-5876, or Jeff Bien at (601) 384-2814.

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GARY W. BENNETT

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Date