

**Decision Notice
And
Finding of No Significant Impact**

**Utility Corridor Maintenance
For
Wildlife Habitat Enhancement**

USDA Forest Service
Homochitto National Forest
Adams, Amite, Copiah, Franklin, Jefferson,
Wilkinson, & Lincoln Counties, Mississippi

Introduction

This project is a wildlife habitat enhancement project initiated by a proposed partnership with the National Wild Turkey Federation and Entergy Corporation. Long-term experience has demonstrated that current mechanical hand and machine maintenance methods produces large areas of unnatural, perpetual, dense brush that has limited wildlife benefit. Conversion of these areas to natural grass and low shrub cover, along with additional wildlife habitat improvements sponsored by partners, would enhance wildlife habitat in these areas. It was considered that herbicide useage was required to support the desired condition of grasses and low shrubs.

In general, utility corridor maintenance is categorically excluded from documentation. However, in his 1989 decision related to Vegetation Management in the Coastal Plain/Piedmont, the Regional Forester directed that projects proposing the use of herbicides in the general forest would require appropriate analysis and be considered against non-herbicide alternatives. While the proposed wildlife improvements are inherently categorically excluded, herbicide applications supporting the improvements required analysis to comply with Regional Forester direction.

The Environmental Assessment for the Utility Corridor Maintenance For Wildlife Habitat Enhancement project documents two management alternatives, including a “No Action” alternative. The Environmental Assessment is on file in the Homochitto Ranger District Office in Meadville, Mississippi. The Environmental Assessment was prepared by an Interdisciplinary Team for the purpose of permitting herbicide use for vegetative maintenance on all power, oil, and gas utility corridors on the Homochitto National Forest, and also permits wildlife habitat improvements to be established in these areas. This project will maintain natural ecosystem components and promote ecosystem diversity on the Homochitto Ranger District through control of vegetation which interferes with wildlife use of utility corridors. This decision will continue for a period of five (5) years from the date of implementation. This decision will be periodically reviewed for consistency as guidelines or conditions change. In the absence of substantial change, this decision may remain valid beyond the projected period.

Public Involvement

Public Involvement included an initial scoping period in which mailings were made to individuals and organizations who have expressed interest in projects concerning utility corridors, recreation, and herbicide use. Two comments which fully supported the project and the appropriate use of herbicides in a utility corridor maintenance program were received during initial scoping. A third individual voiced inquiries pertaining to the project during the scoping and comment period, but officially withdrew any interest in the project that might have been implied by his questions. Under current direction, comments that are wholly supportive of a project do not provide cause to elevate the level of analysis, nor to make projects appealable if evaluated in an EA or EIS.

A description of the proposed activities and a request for comments was posted in the Jackson *Clarion Ledger* (paper of record for the National Forests in Mississippi). This initiated a 30 calendar day period in which the Environmental Assessment was made available for public review and comment. There were no substantive comments received during the public comment period, nor interest expressed concerning the proposed action.

Prior to this decision, the National Wild Turkey Federation and Entergy petitioned the Forest Service to include Escort (metsulfuron methyl) herbicide in the environmental analysis. The herbicide was included and analyzed in the “Proposed Action” of the final environmental assessment. No substantial direct, indirect, or cumulative effects were revealed by the analysis as a result of the inclusion of this herbicide in the project.

Issues and concerns found in Chapter 1 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment were generated internally. The Responsible Official has not modified the preferred alternative (proposed action) and has elected to implement the preferred alternative as originally described in the Pre-Decisional Environmental Assessment.

Decision

Based upon the analysis in this Environmental Assessment, it is my decision to implement the “Proposed Action” – Herbicide Maintenance. The environmental analysis discloses that no adverse cumulative effects or irreversible commitment of resources would take place with implementation of the “Proposed Action.” The “Proposed Action” is detailed in Chapter 1 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment.

Implementation of the “Proposed Action” includes the following:

- Triclopyr (ester), triclopyr (amine), imazapyr, glyphosate, metsulfuron methyl, and/or fosamine ammonium herbicide will be applied to briars, vines, woody sprouts, and other vegetation that inhibits access to and wildlife use of utility corridors.
- Application will be by hand methods of directed foliar spray, cut surface spray, or streamline basal spray utilizing backpack sprayers, or by selective mechanical methods using specialized application equipment.

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- This herbicide maintenance option will be added to current maintenance options, which include clearing with hand tools, tractor mowing, and cutting equipment such as powerline cutters.
- Selected areas will be disked with a light tractor or similar equipment and/or revegetated for purposes of wildlife food plot establishment.

Herbicide quantities are listed in detail for the “Proposed Action” in the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment. These are class “A” herbicides with low toxicity in compliance with the Record of Decision for the Vegetative Management Plan for the Coastal Plain/Piedmont.

The Environmental Assessment discloses the effects of the “Proposed Action” alternative with mitigation measures applied. Any specific mitigation that is above the standard mitigation measures specified in the Forest Plan is discussed for each alternative. Standard mitigation measures that generally apply to all activities across the forest, including the actions discussed in the Environmental Assessment for the Utility Corridor Maintenance Project, are attached in Appendix F for reference.

Other Alternatives Analyzed in Detail

Alternative 1: No Action

The “No Action” alternative proposes no change in the current methods of utility corridor maintenance. Vegetative maintenance objectives would be accomplished through the use of hand tools and/or mowing/cutting equipment.

Alternatives Not Analyzed in Detail

Alternatives considered but not analyzed in detail include:

The “Proposed Action” Without Wildlife Plots

An alternative that did not include wildlife food plot construction was considered. Although the construction of wildlife food plots could be performed as a Categorical Exclusion and, therefore, not included in the Environmental Assessment, the Interdisciplinary team determined that food plots could be more effectively constructed and maintained through removal of competing root stock with herbicides. For that reason, it was determined by the Interdisciplinary Team that incorporation of wildlife food plots as a similar and connected action in the environmental analysis would enhance public understanding of the wildlife enhancement portion of the project. This alternative, therefore, was not pursued further.

The “Proposed Action” Utilizing Other Herbicides

An alternative that considered the use of herbicides other than those detailed in the “Proposed Action” was considered. Other herbicides considered for use in utility corridor maintenance include 2,4-D, picloram, dicamba, and hexazinone.

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The herbicides selected for use do not move readily within the soil, have very low toxicity, and have relatively short half-lives. They are effective against most woody plants. They do not adversely affect water quality and fish at the low concentrations required to control undesirable vegetation.

Other herbicides were eliminated from consideration for use in utility corridor maintenance for various reasons. They either do not effectively control the target vegetation, relocate easily within the soil, are more costly, pose higher safety risks, or are considered generally less environment-friendly. These factors or a combination of these factors made other herbicides less desirable than those selected for the accomplishment of project objectives.

This alternative did not meet the stated purpose and need to accomplish objectives in the safest, most cost effective, and least environmentally disturbing manner; therefore, it was not considered further.

Decision Rationale

The “Proposed Action” was selected because it provides:

- **Increased wildlife habitat quality and diversity.** The existing maintenance policy has promoted a proliferation of woody vegetation that interferes with wildlife use. The use of herbicides in utility corridors of the Homochitto National Forest would increase diversity of plant species in these areas and produce a more open, grassy habitat. (Page 38 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
- **Selective control of target vegetation.** The use of herbicides will be selective and generally confined to areas with a heavy briar or woody component. (Page 6 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
- **Lower risk to workers.** Herbicide treatments produce low human health and safety risks, while increased hand-tool work results in a high rate of accidental lacerations from chainsaws and cutting tools. (Pages 43-45 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
- **No identified environmental disadvantages.** The proposed herbicides do not have significant adverse impacts on populations of non-target plants and animals. Due to their short half-lives, they do not bioaccumulate, and no cumulative effects were identified. (Throughout Chapter 3 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
- **A visually pleasing corridor system.** Both herbicide and hand tool treatments would brown vegetation; however, grasses present on the site or those that develop rapidly after herbicide treatment would screen the smaller brown vegetation. (Page 42 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
- **Economic and operational efficiency.** Hand-tool treatments are less effective and generally require repeated entries for vegetative control. (Pages 40-41 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)

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- **Positive implementation of the following goals set forth in the Forest Plan (4-1).**
 - Provide for safe public use and enjoyment of forest resources.
 - Provide a visually acceptable landscape by maintaining or upgrading the existing visual condition.
 - Provide a spectrum of dispersed and developed recreational opportunities reflective of the demands of the public.
 - Manage the land in a manner that is sensitive to economic efficiency.

Alternative 1, the “No Action” alternative, was not selected because:

- It offered no increase in wildlife habitat quality or diversity.
- It offered no identified environmental advantages over the “Proposed Action”.
- Under “No Action”, current methods of hand and machine cutting would continue to be employed. These treatments have higher worker safety risks than herbicide use.
- The “Proposed Action” provides more effective removal of undesirable vegetation that hinders wildlife use and decreases sight distances.

The existing maintenance strategy for the utility corridor networks of the Homochitto Ranger District utilizes methods that pose inherent health and safety risks to workers, and have promoted a proliferation of woody vegetation that re-grows quickly and interferes with access to and wildlife use of these sites. In light of these circumstances, the use of herbicides for vegetative management along the utility corridor network is more desirable than existing methods.

Consistency with Laws, Regulations, and Previous NEPA Decisions

It is my finding that actions in this decision comply with the requirements of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976, NFMA implementing regulations in 36 CFR Section 219, and the National Forests in Mississippi Land and Resource Management Plan as amended with this decision.

Suitable Lands

The project will not occur on land classified as suitable for timber production as described in the 16 U. S. C. 1604(k) and 36 CFR 219.14 and 36 CFR 219.27(c)(1). The land is not included in the District acreage of lands suitable for timber production due to assignment to other resource use. There are no planned timber harvests under this proposal. Consequently, determinations as to lands which are suitable for timber production is not appropriate.

National Forest Management Act Requirements

This proposal does not involve the manipulation of tree cover for any purpose; therefore, compliance with the seven requirements found in 36 CFR 219.27(b) is not required.

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National Historic Preservation Act

No cultural resources were recorded in prior archaeological field surveys performed in the project area. A standard pedestrian survey of proposed food plots installation areas located no new archaeological sites. Herbicide usage does not require ground-disturbing activity that may impact undiscovered heritage resources. The “No Heritage Resource Form” completed for this project by the District Archaeologist is included in Appendix E of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment.

Clean Water Act

The actions in my decision will have no measurable effects on localized water quality or aquatic species. A site-specific examination of the sites and knowledge of soils in the project area shows that the density of the soils is sufficient to fix the herbicide on the site at the proposed concentrations. Riparian buffer zones and other mitigations as described in the Environmental Assessment would prevent soil and herbicides from entering streams. No large-scale, cumulative, or other adverse effects are anticipated.

Finding of No Significant Impact

I have determined from the analysis in the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment that this is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This determination is based upon the following factors:

1. The analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment did not identify any individual or cumulatively significant adverse or beneficial short- or long-term effects. (Chapter 3 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
2. The decision will not result in any adverse effects on public health and safety (Pages 43-45 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment).
3. This decision will not result in adverse effects to wetlands, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, ecologically critical areas, or other unique characteristics of the area. (Pages 21-28 and Appendix H of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
4. Effects disclosed in the Environmental Assessment are not highly controversial. Controversy here refers to extent or types of effects, not to the level of opposition. (Chapter 3 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
5. I am satisfied that the analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment discloses the effects of the alternatives and that they do not involve uncertain, unique, or unknown risk. (Chapter 3 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
6. This proposal does not establish a precedent for future action beyond the alternatives proposed.

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7. This proposal is not related to other proposals that would cause a cumulatively significant impact. The cumulative effects of this action and other actions are documented in the Environmental Assessment. Those effects are not significant. (Pages 26-28, 38-39, and 47-48 of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
8. This proposal does not affect any properties on or eligible for listing for the National Register of Historic Places. It will not cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources. (Page 43 and Appendix E of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
9. Documented in the Biological Evaluation is the conclusion that no Threatened or Endangered species will be adversely affected by implementing this project. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife service has concurred with this determination. (Appendix D of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)
10. I find that this proposal does not threaten a violation of any Federal, State, or local law or requirement for protection of the environment. Carrying out the proposed actions will ensure consistency with the standards and guidelines, management requirements, and mitigations outlined in the Forest Plan. (Throughout Chapters 1, 2 and 3; and Appendices D, F and H of the Utility Corridor Maintenance Environmental Assessment)

Implementation and Request for Review

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12. Implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, one (1) business day from the date the legal notice is published in the *Clarion-Ledger*, Jackson, Mississippi. For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact the District Ranger, Homochitto Ranger District, 1200 Hwy 184 East, Meadville, Mississippi 39653, or phone the District Planning Team Leader, Charles Price, at (601) 384-5876.

GARY W. BENNETT
District Ranger (Responsible Official)
Homochitto Ranger District

Date