



File Code: 1950
04-03-005

Date: May 9, 2003

Dear Interested Public Land User:

On August 22, 2002, President Bush established the Healthy Forests Initiative (HFI) directing the Department of Agriculture, Department of the Interior, and the Council on Environmental Quality to improve regulatory processes to assure more timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results in reducing the risks of catastrophic wildfires. The **Boswell Creek Watershed HFI Project**¹ is one of the national pilot projects selected to implement the President's Initiative. This watershed encompasses approximately 8,650 acres of national forest located on the Sam Houston National Forest, about 10-15 miles northeast of New Waverly, Texas in Walker County.

Background

The proposed project lies within two Management Areas (MAs) established by the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (the Plan) – MA-2, Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Emphasis and MA-4, Streamside Management Zones. About 95 percent of the forest land in the Boswell Creek Watershed lies within MA-2. The focus of MA-2 is to produce habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW). The Plan describes the desired conditions in MA-2 as open, pine forests mixed with some hardwood species.

Management Area 4, comprising about 5 percent of the project area located adjacent to intermittent and perennial streams, is managed to maintain the role and function of aquatic, riparian, and wetland ecosystems. The types of forest communities desired in MA-4 are generally mixed hardwoods and pines.

The proposed project includes about 5,000 acres of the "Four Notch" area. During the mid-1980s, the pine-dominated forests in the Four Notch area were decimated in a southern pine beetle (SPB) epidemic. Many of the pine sites were site-prepared and planted in the mid- to late-1980s, and the pine trees have grown into saplings and larger trees. As the trees have grown, the amount of hazardous fuel around them has rapidly increased. Many of the reforested areas have 15 years of fuel accumulations, composed of pine needles, small limbs, small dead pines, and flammable understory shrubs. Other areas of mature pines in the watershed that were spared from the SPB in the 1980s also have high fuel accumulations.

Most of these areas, especially these stands of younger trees and some of the older pine stands, are also at high risk of loss from SPB due to the high numbers of pines. Historically, SPB population cycles peak every 7 to 10 years. Our last epidemic was in the early 1990s. In

¹ The President's announcement of the 10 pilot projects referred to this proposal as the Four Notch Project



cooperation with the Texas Forest Service, we completed an evaluation of the SPB hazard in the Boswell Creek watershed. This evaluation concluded that the entire watershed has a high SPB hazard rating.

The existing fuel conditions coupled with the structure and composition of the pine-dominated forests in the Boswell Creek Watershed creates unacceptable risk of loss should wildfire or SPB infestations occur. Losses of pine-dominated forests would be detrimental to the long-term recovery of the RCW. The US Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Plan for the RCW identified the Sam Houston National Forest population as one of several in the southeast United States critical to recovery of the species. The loss of the existing mature pine forests in the area would reduce the amount of potential RCW nesting habitat, which is already in short supply from the 1980s SPB epidemic. The younger pine forests, while not currently suitable for use by the RCW, are rapidly growing and could provide good foraging habitat within 10 to 15 years. Loss of these young forests from fire or SPB would adversely affect the long-term production of quality RCW habitat.

Many private forestlands and structures adjacent to the forest are also at risk of loss from wildfire or SPB infestations that occur on the national forest. Wildfires on the Sam Houston NF could directly threaten adjacent structures or private forestlands. Southern pine beetle infestations that become established near private land could be more difficult to control and could more readily impact private forestlands. The structure and composition of the National Forest near these private lands need to be altered to reduce the potential for wildfire or SPB infestations spreading to these private lands.

Proposed Action

The Sam Houston National Forest (SHNF) is proposing management activities in compartments 69, 70, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77 and 83 in the Boswell Creek Watershed. The proposed management activities are consistent with the management direction in the Plan and would be implemented according to the Plan's Standards and Guidelines. The proposals are to:

- ? Conduct dormant and growing season prescribed burning on approximately 8,650 acres every 2-5 years to reduce risk from destructive fires. We anticipate that about 2,000 to 4,500 acres of national forest land in the watershed would be burned in any year. The season and cycle of burning would be managed to provide the most efficient combination of fuel reduction and protection of the forest.
- ? Thin approximately 4,800 acres of pine stands to reduce SPB hazard. About 3,360 acres of the thinning would be in young (about 15 to 20-year old) forests that were established after the mid-1980s SPB epidemic. The remaining thinning, about 1,440 acres, would be done in older, dense pine-dominated stands.

Attached are maps showing locations of the proposed activities. The maps can also be viewed at the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas Supervisor's Office, 701 North First, Lufkin, Texas or at the SHNF Ranger District, 394 FM 1375, about 4 miles west of New Waverly, Texas.

The proposed treatments further the goals of the President's initiative. They will reduce the

threat of catastrophic wildfires and southern pine beetle hazard to provide protection of national forest lands, adjacent private forestlands, and the scattered homes and structures that lie near the Sam Houston NF.

In 1999 the United States District Court of the Eastern District of Texas issued a Preliminary Injunction (PI) preventing the Forest Service from implementing or making a decision to implement many activities to improve RCW habitat on certain areas on the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas. About 2165 acres in Compartments 75 and 76, where thinning and prescribed burning are proposed, are included in the Boswell Creek Watershed HFI Project and are subject to this injunction. The Government has filed a motion with the Court to lift the PI, but the Court has not yet ruled on the motion.

We will analyze the effects of the project as proposed, which includes the areas in Compartments 75 and 76 subject to the injunction. Should the 1999 injunction be in effect at the time we make a decision, that decision will only include the areas not subject to the injunction. The activities subject to the injunction on Compartments 75 and 76 are about 775 acres of thinning and burning in young pine stands, about 415 acres of thinning and burning in older pine stands, and about 975 acres of burning in other areas where no thinning would be done. A decision on these actions in Compartments 75 and 76 will be deferred until the injunction is lifted.

Issues and Alternatives

Based on past experience with these types of activities on the SHNF, we do not expect significant effects, which is why we are preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA). If you see specific environmental concerns that you believe could result in significant effects, you need to let us know so they can be addressed in the EA. We have not identified any alternatives to the proposed action at this time. Any alternative that is developed must meet the project's need to reduce threat of catastrophic wildfire and reduce southern pine beetle hazard.

In the environmental analysis process, effects to the following resource conditions will be disclosed:

- ✍ Soil;
- ✍ Water resources;
- ✍ Vegetation/fuels;
- ✍ Heritage resources;
- ✍ Air quality and smoke management;
- ✍ Plant and wildlife Management Indicator Species (MIS);
- ✍ Threatened, endangered and sensitive plant and wildlife species.

As part of the Healthy Forests Initiative, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), in a December 9, 2002 memorandum, issued guidance on the development of EAs for these pilot projects. One of the purposes of the pilot projects is to demonstrate what an EA should include when following the CEQ guidance. We expect that the pilot EAs will look different than those

produced in the past with which you may be familiar. You should be aware that the EA will focus on the determination of whether or not there are significant effects that would require the preparation of an EIS. Other analyses that contribute to making a decision, but do not address significance as defined by the National Environmental Policy Act, will not be included in the EA. These other analyses will be available on the internet and at our office.

Decision Framework

The SHNF will decide whether or not to implement the actions as proposed or to choose an alternative set of actions that may be developed depending on the information we receive as the result of public scoping. We do not expect the proposed action will require an amendment to the Forest Plan.

Providing Comments

We are requesting your comments and concerns to help determine whether there will be any significant adverse effects associated with this project and to develop the basis on which to make an informed decision whether to proceed with this proposal. Your comments will help us identify and refine any significant issues and analyze the effects of the proposed action. Please be as specific as possible in expressing your comments or concerns so that we can more effectively address them.

Comments received, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this project, and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments will not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR 215. Additionally, pursuant to 7 CFR 11.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency's decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and if denied, the Agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with or without name and address within five days.

Comments should be sent to the Sam Houston National Forest, Attn: Keith Baker (PAT) or me. Although your comments are always welcome, comments received by June 11, 2003 will be most helpful.

Meet with the Forest Service

We invite you to visit us at an open house at 10 a.m. at the SHNF Ranger Station on Sat., May 24, 2003. For more information about this proposal, please contact Boswell Creek Watershed Project Leader Keith Baker, Sam Houston National Forest, 394 FM1375 West, New Waverly, TX 77358, or (936)-344-6205.

Sincerely,

/s/Timothy R. Bigler

TIMOTHY R. BIGLER
District Ranger

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disabilities, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.