

Executive Summary

The FY 2002-2003 Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Report provides an evaluation of monitoring that has been performed on the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas. (NFGT) It documents recommendations for areas where change may be needed so the Forest Leadership Team can plan actions to address problems or deficiencies.

The 1996 Revised Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (the *Plan*) anticipated funding and implementation of projects that would help move areas toward their desired future conditions (DFCs) sooner than what is currently occurring. Due to on-going litigation and reduced budgets and staff, the NFGT has been unable to effectively work towards *Plan* goals in some areas.

Numerous monitoring activities are conducted annually on the forests; however, this report does not address each activity. Sub-issues developed to address concerns for **Ecosystem Condition, Health and Sustainability, Sustainable Multiple Forest and Range Benefits, and Organizational Effectiveness** are analyzed. Findings and determinations for the 13 sub-issues used to address these main concerns are:

1. **Biodiversity.** Federal court orders and limited budgets have prevented the NFGT from performing necessary management actions and created a situation where:

- A general aging trend on the forest is contributing to a significant Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) hazard.
- Lack of prescribed fire treatments has created fuel buildup, safety concerns, and

has prevented the forest from managing fire-dependent habitats for plant and animal species.

- Species restoration has not been accomplished as set forth in the *Plan* due to court-related restrictions.
- Midstory treatments necessary to maintain and build habitat for an endangered species have not been performed at levels needed to facilitate the Red-cockaded woodpecker's (RCW) recovery.

The unit is succeeding, however, in regeneration of desired tree species and precommercial thinning efforts in some areas. Release treatments are following *Plan* guidelines and restoration of storm-damaged areas is proceeding. The Caddo/LBJ National Grasslands (NGs) has accomplished reversion of some areas back to desired landscapes.

Although the forests have been prevented from implementing certain needed actions, most Management Indicator Species (MIS) have stable populations. Certain MIS were not found to be good indicators of health and new alternatives are being proposed.

Since court injunctions affecting the NFGT were lifted in July 2003, the forest will begin full implementation of the *Plan*.

2. Forest Health.

- The forest is improving adherence to air quality regulations.

- No major problems were reported involving invasive plant or animal species.
- The NFGT still has many pine stands that have a high SPB hazard rating. Thinning and other silvicultural methods can now be used to address these conditions.
- Drought conditions eased.
- There were no losses reported due to wildfires.

3. Watershed Conditions. Based on preliminary data from studies performed on the forest analyzing prescribed burning and mechanical site prepared areas, no significant effects on water quality were observed.

- Plugging and restoration of abandoned wells, containment of spills and clean-up efforts are continuing.
- Soil inventories are being updated.
- Timber sale erosion control efforts are being addressed.
- Watershed restoration projects are being completed.
- Violations of streamside management zones are being identified and corrected. There is no evidence that these violations have had any adverse affects on soil and water quality.
- The forest continues to receive an “excellent” rating from the Texas Forest Service when it performs Best Management Practices (BMP) compliance checks.

4. Outdoor Recreation Opportunities.

- Fishing opportunities appear to be benefiting from aggressive stocking and habitat improvements
- Visual Quality Objectives set in the *Plan* are being accomplished within an appropriate length of time.
- The forest continues to examine various options for operation of recreation areas (including partnerships).
- A National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) survey and market study is being conducted. Once completed, these will provide baseline data about NFGT visits.
- No big recreation construction projects were untaken during the time, but several decommissioning projects were accomplished.
- Trail work was accomplished with the assistance of volunteers and grant monies.
- Restrictions on shooting areas on the Sam Houston NF were issued to manage the areas.
- Numerous maintenance and improvement projects were accomplished through the use of funds collected in Fee Demo recreation areas.
- Use of Wildlife Management Areas continued to be popular with hunters.

5. Infrastructure.

- The NFGT continues to obliterate or decommission roads that are unneeded. Roads analyses are being completed to identify

opportunities to be considered during long-term planning.

- Through annual and semi-annual inspections, deferred maintenance needs have been identified for dams, roads, bridges, major culverts, water and wastewater systems, buildings and other structures. Any of these that become safety concerns are closed until needed maintenance is accomplished.
- Eight properties were sold and a new administrative office was built for the Davy Crockett National Forest.
- No new lands were acquired and rights-of-ways for better public access are being addressed.
- The forest is continuing efforts to meet accessibility guidelines.

6. Human Influences.

- Risks to nearby communities are being evaluated as management actions are planned on NFGT lands.
- Law Enforcement Officers are dealing with various issues due to intermingled ownership patterns and problems from increasing populations.
- The use of prescribed fire and wildfire suppression has become increasingly difficult as staffing and budgets have declined, and urbanization has increased.

7. Roadless Areas/Wilderness/Wild and Scenic Rivers.

- The forest continues to adhere to the Roadless Area Conservation Rule which affects five areas on the Sam Houston National Forest.
- Plans for wilderness areas are being developed to assist the forest in maintaining the natural state of its four wilderness areas.
- No new Wild and Scenic River proposals have been submitted.

8. Timber.

- The forest has been unable to implement the *Plan* due to court orders prohibiting timber harvesting and is therefore not meeting necessary habitat, forest health, and age class and restoration objectives.

9. Forage.

- The Caddo/LBJ NGs need to continue its program of maintaining native prairies and developing desired savannah oak associations through continuing and increasing its vegetation management methods such as prescribed burning, brush mowing and tree shearing.

10. Other Products.

- Fuelwood permits are being sold to individuals, and other personal use products are being provided.

- Minerals activity continues to increase across the NFGT.

are to finalize the project in FY 2004.

11. Heritage Resources.

- During this period, no projects affected properties eligible for, or listed on, the National Register of Historic Places.

The NFGT has identified actions that need to be accomplished such as continuing to assess post-sale erosion control efforts, developing population trends for MIS, and implementation of Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) modules. In addition, the forest will assign a Core Group to evaluate effectiveness of current reporting methods.

12. Economics.

- Funds allocated to the NFGT have been reduced and have affected the rate *Plan* implementation.
- Some increase in personnel has occurred due to the inability to meet targets. The forest is heavily dependent on SCSEP, Host and Volunteer programs to accomplish work in the recreation program.

Several issues affecting the NFGT may require Amendment of Revision of the Plan.

13. Evaluating New Information.

- Several new laws, rules and regulations are affecting management actions on the unit. Rules such as the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, the new Appeal Procedures, the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, along with other initiatives are being adhered to by the NFGT.
- The Boswell Creek Healthy Forest Initiative Project is one of the national pilot projects selected to implement the President's Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities. This large watershed project is being planned for lands on the Sam Houston National Forest and began in May 2003. Plans

- Evaluation of the *Plan's* Chapter V to determine of critical monitoring elements need to be changed including MIS selection and monitoring questions. The Forest Leadership Team decided it will address the MIS issue by the end of FY 2005, but defer evaluation of monitoring questions until the next planning cycle.
- The Grasslands needs strategic direction through a separate or substantial amendment to the *Plan*. In addition, existing Standard MA-3-59 needs to be evaluated for necessary modifications or changes. Each of these issues will also be addressed during the next planning cycle.
- Standards from the Revised Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) Plan need to be incorporated into the current NFGT *Plan*. This issue will be dealt with by the end of FY 2004.

Special Note

A national tragedy and historic event occurred during this reporting period that significantly impacted the NFGT and its employees. The **Space Shuttle Columbia** broke apart and fell across East Texas and western Louisiana on February 1, 2003. A three-month long search

for Columbia Shuttle material began when federal and state agencies deployed teams to the disaster area to assist local fire, law enforcement and emergency management authorities. The U.S. and Texas Forest Services managed Incident Command Posts and conducted the day-to-day search operations. At the end of recovery efforts, the following statistics were compiled:

- Search personnel recovered more than 82,500 pieces of shuttle debris equaling a total weight of 84,800 pounds, or almost 40 percent of the total dry weight of the shuttle.
- Ground, water and air searches combined covered more than 2.28 million acres.
- Water operations successfully identified more than 3,100 targets and covered 23 square miles. More than 16,500 ground search personnel and their support personnel searched an unprecedented 680,748 acres.
- Total man-hours utilized in the recovery effort amounted to approximately 1.5 million.
- More than 130 federal, state and local agencies participated in the recovery effort.
- Approximately 25,000 personnel took part in the operation.

- The operation was supported by more than 270 organizations including businesses and volunteer groups.

In addition, another tragedy occurred during operations when a helicopter crashed killing two members of its crew while injuring three others.

Since U.S. Forest Service resources were heavily involved in the painstaking and often emotional search efforts, many planned accomplishments were affected.

National Forests and Grasslands in Texas personnel join the families of the astronauts and the nation in mourning the loss of seven crew members of the Space Shuttle Columbia and were honored to play a significant role in the recovery of the shuttle.



Columbia Shuttle Emblem.