

Chapter III. Evaluation of Outcomes on the Land

As part of the annual monitoring and evaluating process, forests are directed to list outcomes after information provided throughout the report is analyzed. Below are evaluations for the NFGT for FY 2002-2003.

Biodiversity

Vegetation management accomplishments, in comparison to the *Plan's* objectives, are as follows:

- Grasslands units continue to encourage reversion of areas back to their desired landscape by taking action to reduce encroaching species such as the eastern red cedar
- In general, there is an aging trend of age classes throughout the forests. The lack of younger age classes (as anticipated in the *Plan*) prevents the forests from meeting habitat needs and age-class objectives. Aging forests also contributes to significant Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) hazard.
- Regeneration of desired tree species is being accomplished although losses in some areas caused delays in obtaining desired stocking levels. The forest will have to re-program regeneration efforts in certain areas.
- Precommercial thinning and release treatments are following *Plan* guidelines; however, reliance upon natural regeneration often creates the need for follow-up precommercial treatments in order to meeting desired stocking efforts.
- Lack of prescribed fire treatments as set forth in the *Plan* has created fuel buildups and safety concerns as well

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

- Species restoration is not being accomplished at anticipated *Plan* levels because court injunctions have prohibited the efforts necessary to prepare sites for conversion to desired species.
- Restoration of areas damaged in the 1998 windstorm continues. Natural and artificial regeneration methods are being utilized to ensure development of desired vegetation.
- Midstory treatments conducted were more or less consistent with previous years; however, more acres of this treatment are needed to facilitate recovery of the RCW.
- Aging of the forest has also created a situation where four more forest types have stands 95 years of age or older when compared to data from 1991. This aging of the forest is consistent with portions of the *Plan* addressing old growth.

Although the forests have been prevented from implementing portions of the *Plan* that would assist it in maintaining and improving habitat for T&E species, monitoring of population trends of MIS and their relationship to habitat changes shows that most MIS have stable populations.

- After analysis, certain MIS were not found to be good indicators of health and sustainability and alternatives have been proposed that will improve forest monitoring efforts. These new proposals will help the forest better determine that it is meeting NFMA and *Plan* goals for plant and animal diversity, as well as assure the NFGT is continuing progress toward recovery objectives for T&E species and protecting sensitive species.

Since court injunctions affecting the NFGT were lifted in July 2003, the forest looks forward to implementing actions necessary to move the forests toward desired future conditions as envisioned in the *Plan*.

Forest Health

The NFGT continues to meet requirements to ensure air quality is being maintained as well as determining that insects, disease and noxious weeds are not increasing to damaging levels.

- The forest is improving adherence to Federal and State Air Quality Standards and Regulations, as set forth in the *Plan*.
- No gypsy moths, other exotic invasive pests, Ips or Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) beetles were reported as causing problems during this period. However, the NFGT still has a preponderance of high hazard pine stands and efforts should continue to reduce the hazard through thinning or other silvicultural methods.
- Although control efforts continued for a few invasive plant species, most that exist on portions of the forests were monitored to assure that spread has not occurred.
- Continued trapping and hunting of feral hogs is necessary to control this pest which competes with other wildlife species and destroys vegetation with its feeding activities.
- Drought (or rainfall deficits) affecting our Grasslands units eased somewhat during 2002, and was slight to moderate in 2003. Monitoring of effects from rainfall deficits will continue so proposed management actions can be taken to protect resources.
- There were no losses reported due to wildfires in 2002-2003.

Watershed Conditions

Required soil and water resource protection is being accomplished.

- Macroinvertebrate/water quality monitoring is being conducted. Data from samplings will provide a baseline against which future samples, taken after significant management actions, may be compared.
- A long-term soil productivity project is being conducted on one forest to determine whether different management practices affect site productivity. Since eight years worth of data has been collected, preliminary findings will be analyzed and reported in the next annual report.
- Plugging and restoration of abandoned wells, containment of spills and clean-up efforts are continuing. Monitoring will also continue in areas where spills occurred to assure that these efforts are satisfactory and to Forest Service standards.
- Based on results from two recent studies conducted on the forest, off-road vehicle (ORV) use can be a legitimate recreational activity when it can be offered while protecting and maintaining other resources. In order to improve management, the NFGT is working toward designating trails for ORV use.
- Soil inventories are being updated through a contract with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS).
- Employees participated in field training on identifying streamside management zones (SMZs). Violations of the SMZs (the *Plan's* Management Area 4) standards and guidelines were identified and corrected. There is no evidence that

these violations had any adverse affects on soil and water values.

- All forested sites checked by the Texas Forest Service through their Best Management Practices inspections received excellent ratings for protecting water quality.
- Timber sale erosion control efforts continued. Issues such as waterbar construction and documentation of final inspections need to be addressed on some units. Overall, all sites reviewed appear to meet the DFCs stated in the *Plan*.
- Several watershed projects were completed including the re-seeding of areas where failure from previous work failed. The NFGT continues to maintain good watershed condition and adhere to the Clean Water Act.
- The NFGT is addressing the need to rehabilitate plugged well sites and emphasis is placed on verifying that final restoration efforts are adequate.

Outdoor Recreation Activities

Although there are some fishing access problems due to aquatic vegetation, opportunities appear to be benefiting from earlier aggressive stocking and habitat improvements. There is active management of six recreation-area lakes, but others are falling in decline without improvements.

In general, management activities are meeting the Visual Quality Objectives set in the Plan within the appropriate length of time. Better communication between the Forest Landscape Architect and field employees is needed to ensure appropriate project monitoring occurs.

Additional recreation information is provided in the following:

- The Forest Service continues to examine various options for several recreation areas, while also moving forward with existing partnerships for operation of five recreation areas on the Sabine NF and a facility on the Sam Houston NF.
- In FY 03, National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) began on the NFGT and will continue until September 2004. When completed, this survey will offer good baseline data on NFGT visits. In addition, a market study being completed in cooperation with a local university will add to our knowledge of visitation at specific recreation areas. The forest will continue to reduce operation costs and gain efficiencies, while still offering opportunities that are demanded by the public, and that can be supplied with environmental and financial constraints.
- No big recreation construction projects were untaken during FY 2002-2003. Recreation construction has been limited due to funding constraints. Several decommissioning projects such as removal of a non-functioning well house and water tank were accomplished.
- Most trail work on the NFGT is completed through volunteer efforts due to limited trail funding. However, trails grant monies received through the Texas Recreational Trails program and partnerships with groups allowed the forest to construct an equestrian trail, maintain a multiple-use trail, and improve another trail.
- A decision issued In November 2002 which restricts use of certain shooting areas on the Sam Houston NF has improved the district's ability to manage the areas and addresses many of the publics' concerns about their continued use.

- The Fee Demonstration Program in Texas has been non-controversial since every area that already charged fees was placed under the program. Through the use of funds generated from the program, numerous projects were accomplished.
- All forest Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) now have designated camping sites which were developed for the protection of the public during gun deer season and fire safety during periods of hazardous fire conditions. Use has increased over previous years and the sites remain very popular with hunters.

Infrastructure

The NFGT continues to obliterate or decommission roads that are unneeded for public use or for management of public lands. Road reconstruction efforts were accomplished to meet travel and *Plan* road management objectives. Analyses are being conducted for all units to identify certain recommendations and opportunities that can be considered during long-term planning for areas.

The following all have annual or semi-annual inspections performed and each have deferred maintenance needs that are addressed as needed or as funding allows.

- Dams;
- Roads, bridges and 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 under provisions of a new public law that was passed authorizing the Forest Service to sell these

properties and use the proceeds for new administrative facilities. Two more properties will be sold in the future. A new administrative office was also built for the Davy Crockett NF through a cooperative program with the Navy Third Construction Brigade utilizing funding from the sales.

No lands were acquired in 2002-2003. More emphasis in the form of support and funding will be required to make the land acquisition program a success.

In addition, rights-of-ways acquisitions for better public access and the facilitate national forest management are being addressed as well as necessary efforts to meet accessibility guidelines.

Human Influences

The NFGT continues to be affected by intermingled ownership patterns and problems from increasing populations in nearby urban areas.

- Risks to nearby communities are evaluated as management actions are planned for NFGT lands. The use of prescribed fire and during wildfire suppression has become increasingly difficult.
- Law enforcement officials report increases in illegal drug activity and problems in dealing OHV/ORV riders who continue to create trails through protected and sensitive areas.

Roadless Areas/Wilderness/Wild and Scenic Rivers

- The forest continues to adhere to the Roadless Area Conservation Rule that affects four areas on the Sam Houston NF.

- Studies of visitor use in the five wilderness areas indicate low visitation. Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) Plans for wilderness areas have been completed for all but one area on the Sam Houston NF. The forest is concentrating on accomplishing actions recommended for the Upland Island Wilderness, located on the Angelina NF.
- One organization is studying portions of the Neches River to see if it meets the qualifications of a Wild and Scenic River designation.

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.

Forage

- The Caddo/LBJ NGs is maintaining native prairies and developing desired true savannah oak associations through prescribed burning, brush mowing, and tree shearing.
- Also, standard MA-3-59 needs to be reworded because it can be misconstrued as currently written.

Other Products

- Fuelwood permits were sold to individuals and designated as personal use only, while other personal use products such as the occasional permit for use of teepee poles was granted to individuals associated with groups such as the Boy Scouts of America.
- Minerals activities continued to increase while mineral leases and operators were encouraged to work

with district personnel to correct any non-compliance issues that might occur.

Heritage

- During this period, there were no projects implementing the guidelines of the *Plan* that affected properties eligible for, or listed on, the National Register of Historic Places.

Organizational Effectiveness

- Although the NFGT has experienced a decreased in allocations, some increased in personnel has occurred due to the inability to meet targets with the existing workforce. Efforts have been made to replace many of the positions left vacant by attrition, resignations or transfers. The forest was also heavily dependent on SCSEP, Host and Volunteer Programs to accomplish program work.
- The Rural Development Program is active on the forest and is used to stimulate economic development in counties within 100 miles of the NFGT.

Evaluating New Information

- During FY 2003, the forest participated with other federal and state agencies in Space Shuttle Columbia recovery efforts. Since U.S. Forest Service resources were heavily involved, many planned accomplishments were affected.
- The NFGT is continuing its efforts to populate the Natural Resource Information System (NRIS) modules as they become available for use. Once fully operational, this system can provide agency employees,

partners, and the public with access to data used for natural resource decision making.

process of conducting BEs more efficient and consistent throughout the Southern Region.

Several new laws/rules/regulations or orders were published during this period.

- For example, the forest is following the new Notice, Comment and Appeal Procedures for National Forest System Projects and Activities as published in the Federal Register in June 2003.
- The Revised Red-cockaded Woodpecker Recovery Plan was signed during January 2003. Implementation will be accomplished through incorporation of management guidelines into the Plan through a Forest Plan Amendment scheduled to begin in FY 2004.
- The Sam Houston NF adheres to the Roadless Area Conservation Rule as it applies to the four areas of its forest.
- The Boswell Creek Watershed Healthy Forest Initiative Project for the Sam Houston NF was selected as a national pilot project to implement the President's Healthy Forest Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities. The project began in FY 2003 and is planned to be finalized during FY 2004.
- In September 2002, an amendment to the Vegetation Management Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Coastal Plain/Piedmont was issued which simultaneously amended the *Plan* with Non-significant Amendment # 4. This provides new direction for the preparation of Biological Evaluations (BEs) making the