



File Code: 1900

Date: November 9, 2007

Dear Interested Citizen:

The Shawnee National Forest, Hidden Springs Ranger District, is preparing an analysis for prescribed burning of Cave Hill, Dennison Hollow, and Stoneface Research Natural Areas and adjacent lands (about 3108 acres) and Simpson Township Barrens Ecological Area and adjacent land (about 494 acres). The expansions of the burn beyond the designated natural areas boundaries are designed to minimize fire-line disturbances to the natural areas, limiting the potential for invasion of non-native invasive plant species. This will be accomplished by using features such as creeks, bluffs, roads, and trails as fire control lines. The proposed activity would include the fire lines needed to contain the prescribed burns.

Mead's Milkweed (*Asclepias meadii*) is a federally-listed threatened plant species. During the spring of 2007, we burned about 262 acres of Mead's Milkweed habitat. This species responded favorably to the burn yielding a record number of native stems (38 plants) compared to the greatest number previously found (27 plants).

This letter and the attached Proposed Decision Memo describe the proposed action for individuals who may wish to comment. The project locations are shown on the attached maps, or the maps can also be found on our web site (www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/shawnee).

The purpose of this burning is to increase sunlight to the barren and glade plant communities and reduce the understory component of shade-tolerant tree species (maples, elms and others). This may also benefit any potentially undiscovered populations or individual plants of the shade-intolerant Mead's Milkweed. Additionally, the burning would also provide for plant and animal community diversity by encouraging regeneration of oak-hickory forest communities and associated herbaceous and shrub species adjacent to the barren communities. The proposed action is consistent with management recommendations described in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Meads Milkweed Recovery Plan, the establishment records for each of the Research Natural Areas, and the Shawnee Land and Resource Management Plan.

The two burn units are located within and adjacent to three research natural areas in Saline County and one ecological area in Johnson County. All of these areas have had past fire management and tree/shrub removal. Prescribed burning will have a negative effect on many non-native invasive species that may occur in the project areas, such as Japanese honeysuckle and multiflora rose.

The four burn units from the prescribed burning of Mead's Milkweed (*Asclepias meadii*) habitat decision are not part of this decision. Preliminary analysis would indicate that there are no



extraordinary circumstances that would be adversely affected (individually or cumulatively) or have significant environmental effects. This initial finding is based on the prescribed burning of Mead's Milkweed habitat decision, reviewing past prescribed burns in and adjacent to the immediate area, and a history of prescribed burning on the Forest.

We are currently negotiating a programmatic agreement with the State Historic Preservation Office and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation regarding the use of prescribed fire. This agreement will be in place before the decision is made on this project. Initial environmental consideration of the proposed action indicates the use of a category exclusion to be appropriate. I intend to use Categorical Exclusion FSH 1909.15 – Chapter 30, Section 31.2 Category 6, Timber Stand Improvement and/or Wildlife Habitat Improvement, prescribed burning to reduce natural fuel build-up and improve plant vigor. We are conducting scoping and the 30-day comment period concurrently. We anticipate making a final decision on this project after the close of this 30-day scoping and comment period. Records of the environmental analysis are available for public review at the Hidden Springs Ranger District. Additional information regarding this action can be obtained from: Elizabeth Shimp, Hidden Springs Ranger District, 602 North 1st Street, Vienna, Illinois, 62995, phone 618-658-2111, eshimp@fs.fed.us.

How to Comment and Timeframe

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, and electronic comments on this action will be accepted for 30-calendar days following the publication of this notice. The publication date in the *Southern Illinoisan*, newspaper of record, is the exclusive means for calculating the comment period for this analysis. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. Regulations prohibit extending the length of the comment period (36 CFR 215.6).

Written comments must be submitted to: Jeff Seefeldt, District Ranger, Hidden Springs Ranger District, 602 North 1st Street, Vienna, Illinois, 62995, FAX 618-658-1300. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 - 4:30 M-F, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to comments-eastern-shawnee@fs.fed.us. Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments.

Appeal Eligibility

It is the responsibility of persons providing comments on the proposed project to submit them by the close of the comment period. Those who express an interest during this comment period are eligible to appeal the decision under the regulations.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jeff Seefeldt
JEFF SEEFELDT
District Ranger

Enclosures (2)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is an equal opportunity provider and employer.