



File Code: 1950

Date:

Dear Interested Persons:

To reduce fire risk and restore healthy ecosystems, the Mississippi Bluffs Ranger District of the Shawnee National Forest proposes to burn approximately 5400 acres of Forest land and private land in the Buttermilk Hill/Talbott Hollow Blowdown Project. I am requesting comments on the project to help better define the issues and scope of analysis being prepared. Below is an explanation of the reasons for proposing the project and details of the proposal.

Background: On September 26, 2006, a tornado crossed parts of Jackson County, Illinois, affecting approximately 3800 acres of private land and Shawnee National Forest land. Over much of the area minor tree damage resulted, but in several areas moderate and severe canopy damage (greater than 50% canopy loss) was sustained. These areas have high fuel loadings that would make it more difficult and more expensive to fight fires that occur in the area.

Vegetative composition and structure has changed substantially over the last two centuries. Records indicate that the Shawnee Hills likely featured large, widely spaced trees dominated by oak and hickory species on upland sites with a rich, diverse layer of herbaceous plants carpeting the ground in some places. Oak, beech, maple, yellow poplar, and other species were most commonly found in coves and other cool, shaded places. The upland sites were kept open by occasional low to moderate intensity surface fires. Oak species are fire tolerant and do well in these high-disturbance circumstances. In the era of near-total fire exclusion that began in the 20th century, fire-intolerant species began to seed in to areas formerly dominated by oak species, decreasing the amount of light available for grass and herb species and oak seedlings. Now these cove species dominate the understory and midstory in many places where they were formerly absent.

Need for change (Why): Oak and hickory regeneration in most of the area is not adequate to maintain its dominance in the stand. Seedlings of these species cannot survive in the intense shade created by planted pines and invading native and non-native species. As all stands tend towards maple-beech forests, there is a loss of landscape and community diversity, and a corresponding loss of plant and animal diversity. Non-native invasive species are found in the area and further contribute to degraded ecosystems.

Current fuel loadings in the area would increase the intensity and severity of any wildfires that could take place, leading to higher risk to private property and natural, cultural, and human resources. Wildfires here could experience rapid rates of spread, higher intensities, longer and more profuse spotting, and would therefore inevitably grow larger and cost more to suppress. Since the project area lies partially within a municipal watershed and is intermingled with private land and property, such a wildfire is not desirable. Changes in fuel bed properties are needed to lessen the risk to private property and natural and cultural resources.



Proposed Action (What and how): To reduce the risk from such a fire, the Mississippi Bluffs Ranger District of the Shawnee National Forest proposes to burn approximately 5400 acres of Forest land and private land in T8S, R3W, Sections 19 and 28-33, T8S, R4W, Sections 20-29, 33-36, T9S, R3W, Sections 5-6, and T9S, R4W, Section 1 (see attached map). The project area will be subdivided to make burns more manageable, yet keeping unit size large enough to mimic presettlement fire regimes and keep per acre costs down. Burns will be lit by hand or with the aid of a helicopter.

Given the complex and intermingled ownership patterns and the steep, dissected topography, Shawnee National forest personnel approached several landowners in the area regarding burning private lands in conjunction with adjacent Forest lands. This would allow the use of preexisting features (e.g. roads, streams) that could be used for firelines, reducing fuels on adjacent private land, allowing for fewer firelines to be constructed, and making those firelines easier and safer to hold. This in turn would reduce preparation and implementation costs and risks. Several landowners have agreed. Private lands whose owners have declined to participate will not be burned. Burn unit boundaries were designed to avoid those landowners not wishing to participate while including those who do.

Prior to burning, several precautions would be taken, including

- Mowing, chipping, or cutting fuels around selected structures (~25 acres) to provide defensible space and reduce intensity during prescribed burning
- Improving preexisting control features or building up to 10 miles of firelines where necessary
- Writing a prescribed burn plan to describe in detail the actions and mitigations needed, contingency planning, and the specific conditions required for conducting the burn
- Notifying the public
- Coordinating the timing and/or placement of burns with specialists to minimize negative impacts on wildlife, recreation opportunities, or public safety
- Protecting recreational infrastructure and cultural resource sites where needed

The burns would be closely monitored to prevent escapes. After the burn, more precautions would be taken to avoid negative impacts on the land.

- Shawnee National Forest personnel would remain on scene until the burn is deemed safe to leave
- Firelines would be rehabilitated where necessary to avoid erosion and establishment of non-native invasive species
- Post-burn monitoring would be conducted to measure the effectiveness of any treatments and mitigation measures

When: Burns would be conducted between October 1 and April 15. First entry on all units should be made within two years. Successive burns would be made after 2-5 years. Burn frequency may be adjusted if monitoring shows that the desired future condition is already reached or is not going to be reached within 10-15 years.

Decision to be Made: An environmental analysis will be prepared for the project in accordance with Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 Section 31.1 and Public Law 108-48 (Healthy Forests Restoration Act). I will decide whether or not to implement the project as proposed, implement the project with modifications (such as changing mitigation measures), or to develop alternatives based upon key issues. Key issues are disagreements that are tied to environmental effects and are based upon an anticipated effect(s) of the proposed action. Any such issues that arise from the responses to this proposal would be used to develop alternatives to the proposed action and focus subsequent analysis. Color maps for the project can be downloaded from <ftp://ftp2.fs.fed.us/incoming/r9/Shawnee/Blowdown/>.

Information for this and other Shawnee National Forest projects can also be viewed at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/shawnee/projects/projects/>. Project documents are also available at the Murphysboro Work Center, 2221 Walnut St. Murphysboro, IL.

Please send your comments to this proposal in writing to Monica Neal, Project Records, Shawnee National Forest, 50 Highway 145 South, Harrisburg, IL 62946, FAX (618) 253-1060, or monicaneal@fs.fed.us. Scoping ends January 14, 2008. Comments must be received by the close of business that day. Please include your name, address, email or phone number, and the name of the project for which you are commenting. If you have questions, desire clarification of the proposal, or would simply like to be removed from the mailing list, please notify Scott Crist, Project Leader, at (618) 687-1731 or scrist@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

DAN L. LENTZ
District Ranger