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Agriculture

Forest Service

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April 17, 2012



Final Environmental Assessment

Conecuh Shooting Range

and associated

Forest Plan Amendment #3

Management Prescription Change

Conecuh National Forest
National Forests in Alabama
Escambia County, Alabama



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INTRODUCTION

This EA (Environmental Assessment) considers actions proposed to establish a safe outdoor shooting range facility on the Conecuh National Forest. Since firearms use is no longer permitted on the former shooting range site, there is currently no designated site for this recreational activity on the Forest. No public facility exists elsewhere within a modest commute of south central Alabama or the Florida panhandle. The Forest Service recognizes public interest in this type of activity is high and expects use of such a facility, if provided, to be moderate to heavy.

The Forest Service has prepared this EA in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations, including the Forest Plan¹. This EA discloses the alternatives considered and the environmental impacts that would result from each alternative analyzed. This document supports preparation of a Finding of No Significant Impact and provides the basis from which the Deciding Officer can reach an informed decision. The documents cited in this EA and all project documentation are on file at the Conecuh Ranger Station in Andalusia, Alabama.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

For many years, the Forest Service provided a Shooting Range just off Highway 137 in the Conecuh National Forest for the recreational benefit of hunters and firearms enthusiasts. In January 2011, District Ranger Stephen Lee closed the range until a thorough site evaluation could be completed and safety and maintenance repairs could be performed. After an extensive review, consultation with the NRA (National Rifle Association), and dialogue with range users, the Forest Service released a proposal to address safety concerns and perform needed maintenance. The Forest Service requested public comments on this formal proposal in September 2011. Based upon comments received, concern continued to exist that the proposal would not adequately address downrange safety issues at the Highway 137 site.

To respond to these safety concerns, Ranger Lee assigned an ID (interdisciplinary) Team to identify and evaluate alternative locations that could possibly better meet overall safety objectives and to explore the feasibility of constructing a new shooting range elsewhere on the Conecuh National Forest. Several sites were considered; however, a large borrow pit in Escambia County best met selection criteria. Criteria considered included presence of 3 miles of contiguous national forest land down range to meet safety objectives, characteristics of adjacent ownerships, local area population density, and impacts to natural resources.

The Forest Service also contacted the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (Department of Conservation and Natural Resources) to explore the possibility of working as partners on construction of a new range facility. After several discussions and an onsite meeting at the borrow pit, agreement was reached that a cooperative project was feasible and a formal proposal should be developed and pursued. At that time, the Forest Service made an administrative decision to eliminate firearm use on the Highway 137 site and consider an alternative use of that site, such as an outdoor classroom or archery range. Alternative uses of the Highway 137 site continue to be explored and a forthcoming proposal will address those at a future time. The future use of the Highway 137 site and the administrative decision to eliminate firearm use at that site are outside the scope of this document.

¹ Revised Land and Resource Management Plan, National Forests in Alabama, January 2004, USDA, Forest Service, Southern Region, Management Bulletin R8-MB 112A.

PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

The Forest Plan includes direction to provide a variety of recreation opportunities, including shooting ranges. Goal 22 for the National Forests in Alabama² is to “provide a spectrum of high quality, nature-based recreation settings and opportunities...” It calls for evaluation of recreation quality using a variety of factors, including safety and the condition of the facilities³. It provides direction to strive to be responsive to deficiencies⁴ in recreational opportunity. Since firearm use will no longer be allowed at the Highway 137 site, another location must be selected if the Conecuh National Forest is to continue to offer this type and quality of recreational opportunity.

Demand for a public shooting range on the Conecuh is gauged to be high, based upon use at the former site and the numerous and diverse contacts requesting information on the status of the shooting range since the time of the temporary closure notice was issued in January 2011. No other public range exists within Covington and Escambia Counties where Conecuh National Forest lands occur, nor within a much larger area of South Alabama spanning the large population centers of Mobile to the west and Dothan to the east. Historic use and recent contacts from citizens indicates a Conecuh Shooting Range would serve a large population of Florida panhandle residents as well.

The scope of this project is limited to the site-specific project area defined by the Proposed Action. The Forest Service must decide whether to establish a shooting range at the proposed location and, if so, the actions needed to meet safety objectives and minimize impacts to natural resources. Any forthcoming decision must comply with the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan. If a shooting range is authorized at the proposed site, the decision would amend the Forest Plan management prescription for the site to ensure compatibility with Plan direction (see Proposed Action, page 6-7).

ISSUE DEVELOPMENT

The ID Team used a variety of methods to inform and engage the public about the Proposed Action. The outreach effort helped the team assess the scope of the project and determine the potential issues that should be addressed. District Ranger Tim Mersmann, the line officer responsible for the project level analysis, selected the final issues. These issues were used to consider the alternatives and compare the effects of the Proposed Action on the quality of the human environment.

Public Involvement: Documentation for the various public outreaches is on file at the Ranger Station in Andalusia, Alabama. Methods used included:

- ID Team members conducted personal conversations with nearby residents, local government officials, other agency representatives, known users of the former shooting range, and other potentially interested individuals and businesses specializing in hunting supplies.
- On January 28, 2012, a legal notice was published in the Andalusia Star-News requesting public comment on the Proposed Action. The formal public comment period ran for 30 days.
- Concurrent with the Request for Comments legal notice, packages were mailed via a combination of the Postal Service and electronic mail to known interested citizens and local officials.
- On February 3, 2012 a news release publicizing the comment period for the Proposed Action was issued to several local radio stations and newspapers.
- In early February 2012, a one-page flyer describing the Proposed Action and comment period was shared with local sporting goods and convenience stores, including the sporting goods department in Wal-Mart.
- The one-page flyer distributed in local stores was posted at the Highway 137 site of the former shooting range.

² Forest Plan, page 2-55.

³ Forest Plan Objective 22.1, page 2-56.

⁴ Forest Plan Objective 22.2, page 2-56.

The public involvement campaign yielded more than a dozen official comments regarding the Proposed Action. The majority of comments received were supportive of the Proposed Action to establish a new range at the borrow pit site. A few were more neutral about a new range at the proposed site, but still desired a shooting range available closer to Andalusia, Alabama (either at another new location or the former Highway 137 site). Concerns and suggestions relative to safety were mentioned a few times and remained an important consideration for the ID Team throughout this process. None of the public comments included concerns or issues on the effects of the Proposed Action to natural resources.

The prior administrative decision to eliminate firearms use from the Highway 137 site is final and not within the scope of this project proposal; however, a few comments still favor retention of a shooting range at that site because the Proposed Action would increase their travel distance. Advocates of the Highway 137 site suggested installation of additional safety measures (such as overhead baffles) they thought would make it feasible to reopen it to firearms use. The Forest Service position is, given the inherent challenges presented by the proximity of the Highway 137 site to private land and residences, additional mitigation measures are not feasible because of:

- **Effectiveness:** Installation of overhead baffles and other aggressive mitigation measures would require a high level of compliance monitoring to be effective. Such measures would also be restrictive to the user experience. The Forest Service has determined overhead baffles and similar measures would not achieve the safety standards or recreational experience desired.
- **Cost:** A range design including aggressive safety measures, such as overhead baffles, would require a costly initial investment. Long-term compliance monitoring and maintenance costs of such a design plan would also be substantial.

The rationale for why extra mitigation measures are not feasible was explained to those who raised it during the comment period, even though any decisions about the Highway 137 site are outside the scope of this project. In addition to these discussions, several comments either requested more information or needed clarification about the proposal and decision process. In each case, Tim Mersmann, Daks Kennedy, or Debbie Russell provided additional information, clarification, and discussion. The Forest Service's intent is to maintain an ongoing open dialogue with the public regarding this proposal.

Issues: Based on public comments and discussions among ID Team members and resource specialists, District Ranger Tim Mersmann selected the following issues to be addressed by the team and documented in this EA.

1. Public Safety
2. Public Travel Distance

ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

During project development, the ID Team considered eight possible locations for establishment of a new shooting range on the Conecuh National Forest. The ID Team narrowed the original list of sites to two sites that best satisfied the State's safety criteria of providing three miles downrange suitability. The site that best met all of the criteria considered by the ID Team was developed into the Proposed Action. This EA documents analysis of the Proposed Action and a No Action Alternative. It also discloses the need to amend the Forest Plan to change the Management Prescription for the site should a decision be made to implement the Proposed Action.

No Action Alternative: The Forest Service would not take any action to establish a new shooting range on the Conecuh National Forest. With no designated site, the opportunity for recreational shooting would not exist on the Conecuh National Forest. The previous administrative decision to eliminate firearms use at the Highway 137 site would remain in effect. Since a new shooting range would not be established under this alternative, no change in the Management Prescription for the

proposed site would be needed; therefore, no Forest Plan amendment would be required. This alternative serves as the baseline with which the Proposed Action Alternative will be compared.

Proposed Action: The Forest Service would establish a shooting range on the Conecuh National Forest near the intersection of Escambia County Roads 11 and 4 at the location of an old borrow pit that is approximately 5 acres in size. The proposed site is within administrative unit Compartment 62, about 21 miles east of Brewton, AL and 29 miles southwest of Andalusia, AL (see General Location Map, page 6).

The proposed Conecuh Shooting Range would provide shooting opportunities for rifles, handguns, and shotguns. Design and construction of the new facility would incorporate NRA guidelines for outdoor ranges and include the following features:

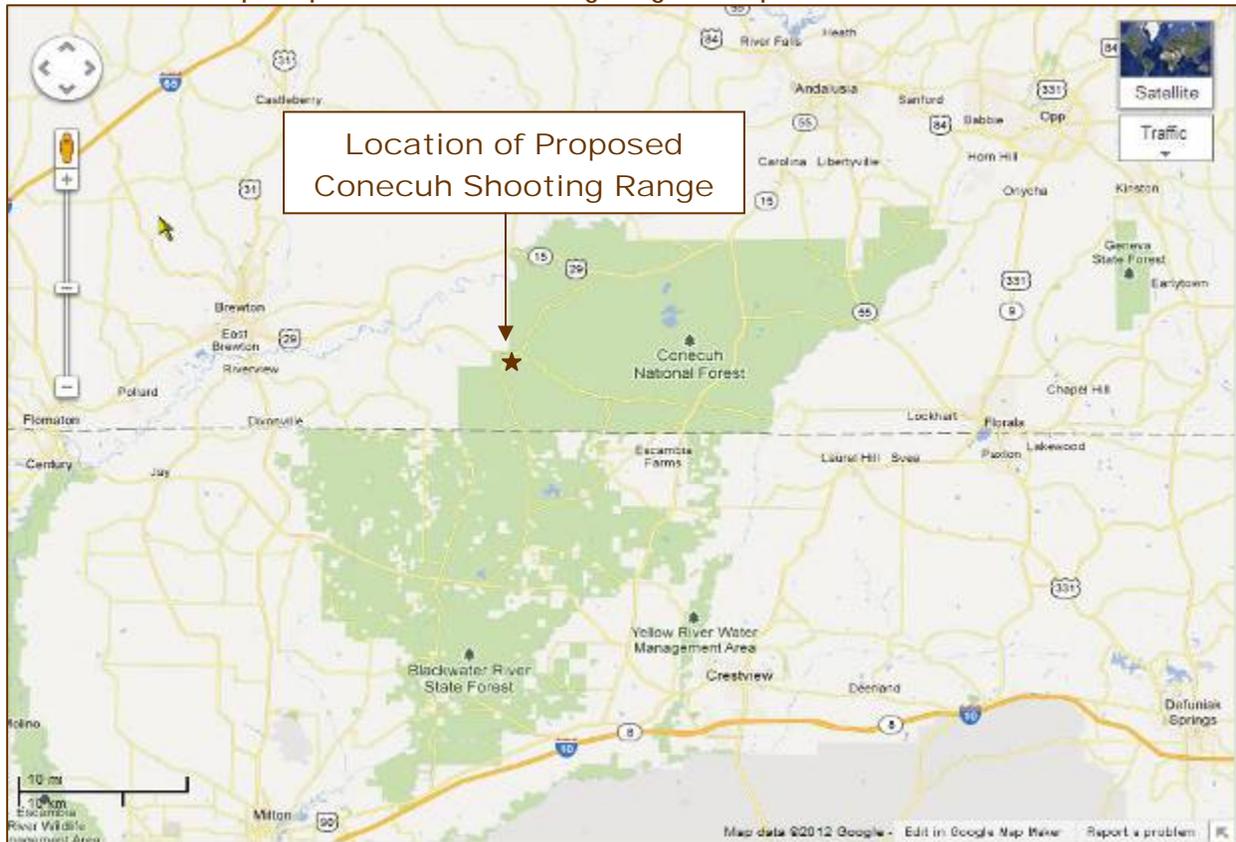
- 100 yard firing lane and earthen berm backstop with 10 individual rifle stations
- Combination 50/25 yard firing lane and earthen berm backstops with 10 individual stations for rimfire rifles and handguns
- Area separate from the firing lanes for shooting clays (shotgun only)
- Accessible sidewalk(s) down firing lanes to place/retrieve paper targets
- Fully accessible station(s) and parking
- Individual parking adjacent to each shooting station
- Covered concrete pad(s) for 20 stations (approximately 10 x 180 feet)
- Pit toilet(s) similar to those provided at the Blue Lake Recreation Area and elsewhere on the Conecuh National Forest

Construction of the shooting range, including parking and access, would be accomplished in partnership with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries. The State has built a number of public shooting ranges with Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries equipment, personnel and Wildlife Restoration Act funding⁵ over the years. The South Sandy Shooting Range on the Oakmulgee Ranger District was constructed by means of a similar partnership several years ago. The proposed Conecuh Shooting Range would closely resemble the design of the South Sandy Range, pictured here.



⁵ The Wildlife Restoration Act was enacted in 1937 and provides funding for wildlife conservation related efforts through federal excise taxes. These funds are commonly known as Pittman-Robertson funds, referring to representatives who sponsored the original legislation. Excise taxes currently authorized are: 11% on sporting arms and ammunition, 10% on handguns, and 11% on archery equipment and accessories.

General Location Map, Proposed Conecuh Shooting Range Site, April 2012.



The Proposed Action would also include removal of trees within the footprint of the shooting range site, parking areas, and access route as well as thinning trees as needed to improve visibility between the range site and main road. In addition, the surrounding area served by the main access through this site would be thinned at the same time to meet forest health and restoration objectives and red-cockaded woodpecker habitat needs. The total area subject to commercial timber harvest would be approximately 70 acres, including the existing borrow pit.

Site construction would involve hauling in additional soil and/or application of fertilizer to facilitate construction of berms and to improve soil conditions to establish vegetation desired for the facility. Applications of lime, phosphate, or other material to adjust soil pH may occur to reduce the mobility of lead in the environment in compliance with an Environmental Stewardship Plan, which would be finalized in conjunction with design plans.

Elimination of public traffic on roads within the downrange safety fan would be required for public safety. Roads that would require permanent closure would be those dead end spur roads east and north of FS 300 (9 total), FS 311LL, and FS 311U. Combined, these 11 roads total approximately 6 miles and all of them are seasonally closed each year.

Once construction is complete, the Forest Service would be responsible for operation and maintenance of the facility. To help defray these costs, it is anticipated that a modest user fee would be implemented. However, implementation of a fee is not part of this Proposed Action and is not part of the decision to be made at this time.

This Proposed Action has been developed in compliance with the Forest Plan, specifically Goal 22 and Objectives 22.1 and 22.2⁶ as described in the *Purpose of and Need for Action*. The spirit and intent of the Concentrated Recreation Zone prescription⁷, which provides recreational areas that

⁶ Forest Plan Goal 22 and Objectives 22.1 and 22.2, pgs 2-55 to 2-56, Forest Plan.

⁷ Concentrated Recreation Zone, prescription 7.D, pgs 3-29 to 3-31, Forest Plan.

enhance the quality of the recreational experience and serve as “gateways” to the wide diversity of recreation opportunities on the forest, was also incorporated into the development of the Proposed Action. However, a Decision to implement this Proposed Action would amend the Forest Plan, designating the new Conecuh Shooting Range site as a Concentrated Recreation Zone prescription and removing it from the Red-cockaded Woodpecker Management Areas prescription⁸. The management prescription boundary would be defined by the maintenance area of the shooting range and associated parking area.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Study: The ID Team considered several alternatives; however, only the two alternatives described above were studied in detail. Each of the other alternatives considered was dropped from detailed study. Below is a brief description of these alternatives and a short discussion of why each was not considered in detail.

Alternative Sites with insufficient downrange property: The initial list of potential sites for a new shooting range developed by the ID Team included eight locations across the forest. As discussions with the Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries proceeded, the ID Team narrowed the potential site list to two locations that could meet the State’s criteria for providing 3 miles down range to meet safety objectives. Since the other six potential sites did not meet this criterion and therefore would provide smaller safety zones than the remaining two sites, they were dropped from further consideration and not analyzed in detail.

Cross Country/Bear Bay Alternative: A site off FS 305 (Cross Country Road) in the vicinity of Bear Bay was considered because 3 miles of downrange Forest Service property could be provided across Compartments 34 and 48. This site would require more work and resource impacts to clear for a construction site, and thus be more costly than the Proposed Action. The downrange area would include a large bay area, and potential concerns were raised about lead contamination and/or recovery in a wetland site. This site falls within prescription 4.I Natural Areas – Few Open Roads⁹ where the emphasis is to “*Provide recreation opportunities in isolated areas where users can obtain a degree of solitude and the environment can be maintained in a near-natural state.*” Based upon these considerations, the ID Team felt this site would not provide the best option available for establishment of a new shooting range and recommended it not be carried through detailed study.

⁸ Red-cockaded Woodpecker Management Area, prescription 8.D.1, pgs 3-36 to 3-37, Forest Plan.

⁹ Natural Areas – Few Open Roads, prescription 4.I, pgs 3-18 to 3-19, Forest Plan.

Comparison of Alternatives: A variety of resource specialists from the National Forests in Alabama participated in development and analysis of the alternatives considered under this project. The effects of the Proposed Action and the No Action Alternative on the quality of the human environment are briefly discussed in the next section. A comparison of effects for these two alternatives is displayed below.

Comparison of Effects for the Proposed Action and No Action Alternative, Conecuh Shooting Range Project, Conecuh National Forest, April 2012.		
Resource Area	No Action Alternative	Proposed Action
Soil & Water Resources	No effect	Slight risk of erosion and compaction from site construction and tree thinning actions; full recovery expected within 1-3 years
Vegetation Resources	No direct effect; Slight increase to forest health risks & slight decrease in understory diversity from lack of thinning around the proposed range site	Reduced forest health risks and increased understory diversity from thinning trees around the proposed shooting range site
Wildlife Resources	No direct effect on management indicator species; Slight indirect effect to red-cockaded woodpecker as habitat declines around the proposed range site	No direct effect on management indicator species; Thinning improves red-cockaded woodpecker habitat around the proposed range site; Biological Evaluation determined actions are 'not likely to adversely affect' the RCW; Actions will have 'no effect' on other listed species
Social Impacts	No effect to heritage resources; Slight increased risk to safety of forest users and workers from unmanaged target practice; Direct negative impact to citizens who would like to utilize a public shooting range	No effect to heritage resources; Positive impacts to firearms enthusiasts who desire to use a public shooting range; Increased range safety environment and improved recreational experience for potential users; Mixed effects on range users relative to travel distance: some users will have to travel further, others will have to travel less

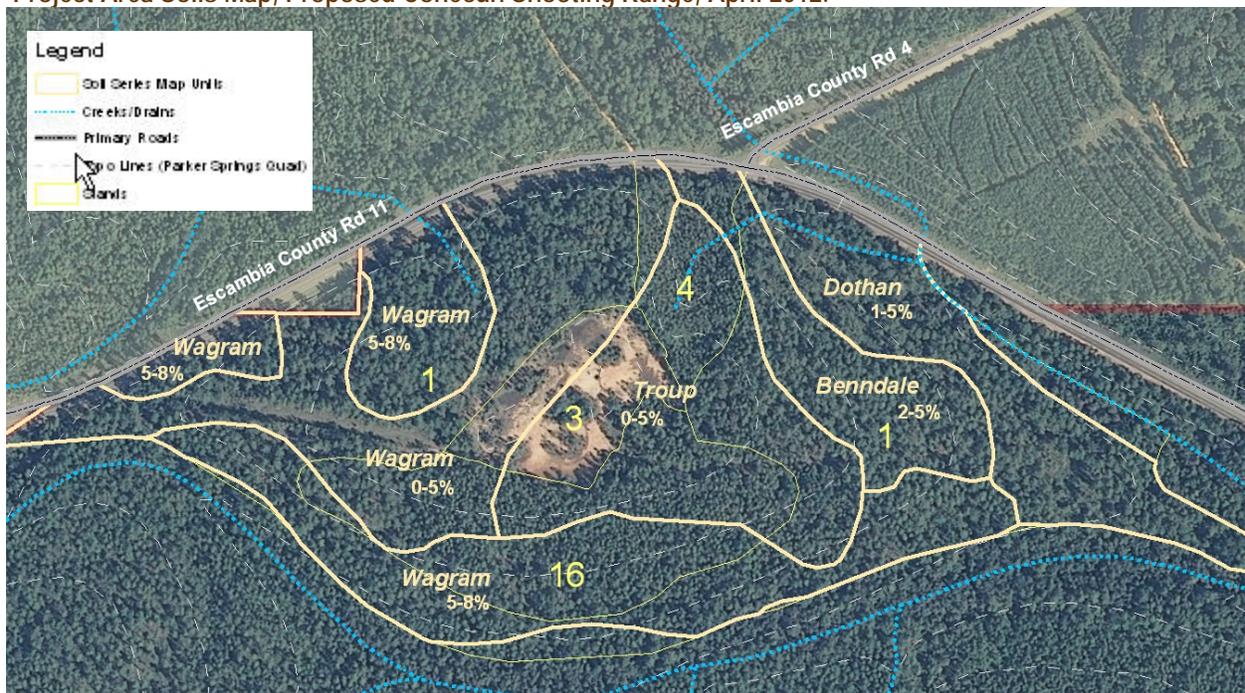
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The environmental effects of the Proposed Action and No Action Alternative were considered by resource specialists for the Conecuh National Forest and from the Supervisors Office of the National Forests in Alabama. This section briefly describes existing conditions and potential physical, biological, and social impacts of the two alternatives considered in detail. Given the limited project size and scope of the action alternative and its proposed location in an old borrow pit, physical and biological effects are expected to be negligible for both alternatives. The most definitive contrast between the Proposed Action and No Action Alternative lies within the social impacts relevant to the issues of safety and public travel distance and to whether or not the recreational experience afforded by a shooting range is available.

If a decision is made to implement the Proposed Action, the establishment of a shooting range at the proposed site would require a management prescription change that would become Forest Plan Amendment #3. The management prescription change would be limited to the maintenance area of the proposed shooting range and associated parking area. Amendment #3 would affect an area less than 10 acres in size. The amendment would not authorize any ground disturbing activities and as such would have no direct effects, indirect effects, or cumulative impacts to the environment. There would be no irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources, and it would not affect the productivity of the National Forests in Alabama from the current management direction.

Soil & Water Resources: The project area is comprised of four well-drained primary soils series, one of which is broken into two map units based on slope. The entire project area is classified as best suited for longleaf pine based on soil mapping and characteristics of the soil series identified in the project area. The Project Area Soils Map shows delineation of the soil types over an aerial photo of the project area with stand designations in the background.

Project Area Soils Map, Proposed Conecuh Shooting Range, April 2012.



Soil erosion hazard and soil compaction hazard ratings are assigned to each soil unit and are considered in each site-specific project analysis for the Conecuh National Forest. Analysis determined the majority of the treatment acreage to be rated slight for both the soil erosion hazard and soil compaction hazard. About one-third of the project area has a moderate rated soil erosion hazard due to slope. There would be no effect to soil and water resources under the No Action Alternative, because no soil would be disturbed.

Project Area Soils Classifications, Proposed Conecuh Shooting Range, April 2012.

Soil Series	Slope	Acres	Erosion	Compaction	Drainage
Benndale	2% - 5%	7	slight	slight	well
Dothan	1% - 5%	10	slight	slight	well
Troup	0% - 5%	14	slight	slight	well
Wagram	0% - 5%	17	slight	slight	well
Wagram	5% - 8%	21	moderate	slight	well

Routine mitigation practices, such as adherence to State best management practices and Forest Plan standards, are expected to reduce the effects of possible soil erosion and compaction associated with the Proposed Action from construction of the shooting range site, parking area, and access road work and from tree thinning operations. Based on experience, monitoring, and research, as well as the limited scope of the project work, the Proposed Action poses only a slight risk of soil erosion or compaction and sediment yields would not be significant. Watersheds within the project area, and their designated uses, would maintain their current condition throughout the duration of this project cycle. Cumulative effects would be short term with recovery expected in one to three years after project implementation.

The potential for lead leaching and future lead recovery or recycling is a standard consideration in shooting range sites. Should a forthcoming decision implement the Proposed Action, the final design plans will include an approved Stewardship Plan which will specify design criteria and mitigation necessary to ensure lead leaching is minimal and potential future lead recovery is feasible.

The project area contains no prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas. Therefore, there would be no direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to these resources.

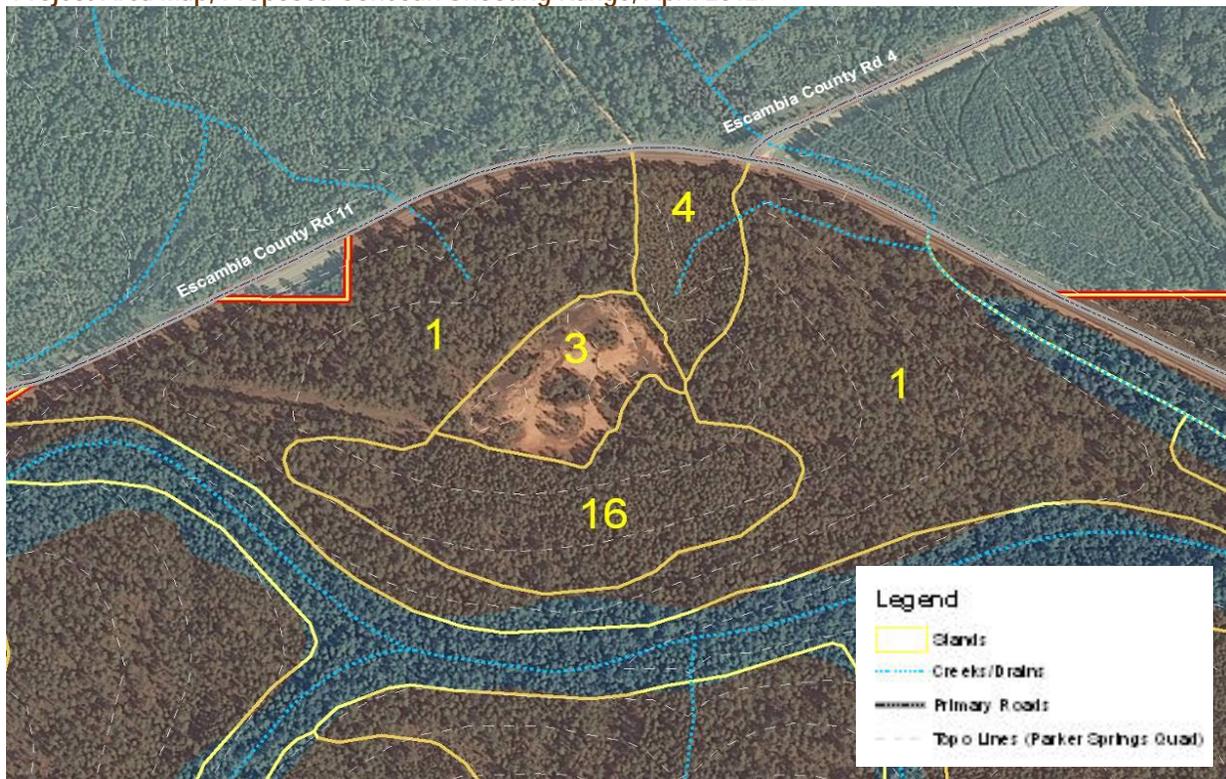
Vegetation Resources: The project area is approximately 70 acres total and is defined by four stands in the Forest Service stand inventory database. One of these stands is the 5-acre borrow pit (62-3). Recent inventory¹⁰ shows basal areas exceeding those desired for red-cockaded woodpecker foraging habitat in the three surrounding forested stands. The following map and table illustrate current overstory vegetation conditions of the project area.

Project Area Stand Data Table, Proposed Conecuh Shooting Range, April 2012.

Cmpt/Std	Acres	Mgt Type	Forest Type	Stand age	Basal Area
62-1	50	Longleaf	longleaf	69 yrs	93
62-3	5	longleaf/slash	longleaf	17 yrs	35
62-4	4	longleaf/slash	slash	34 yrs	109
62-16	12	longleaf	mixed pine	43 yrs	123

¹⁰ Stand examinations conducted by Forester Phil Bergsrud in September 2011 for the Compartment 62, 63, 64 Detailed Silvicultural Prescription (completed October 2011 and reviewed by District Ranger Stephen Lee in October 2011).

Project Area Map, Proposed Conecuh Shooting Range, April 2012.



Under the No Action Alternative, the conditions of vegetation would remain unchanged in the short term. Over time, stand composition, structure, and function would become more divergent from the desired condition. Tree growth and vigor would become stagnant, contributing to declining forest health. Increasing stand density and associated closure of the canopy would prevent sunlight from reaching the forest floor, resulting in more shade-tolerant plants, decreased species diversity, and reduced pyrophytic fuels needed to effectively prescribe burn. The project area would become more unsuitable as RCW habitat.

The Proposed Action would remove all trees that need to be cleared for the shooting range footprint and associated parking and access route from Escambia County Road 11. The rest of the project area would be thinned to approximately 60 square feet of basal area to improve red-cockaded woodpecker foraging habitat. The area between the main road and the shooting range would be thinned to approximately 50 square feet of basal area to increase the visibility of the site. Overall forest health and vigor would improve in the thinned stands, and conditions would move closer to the composition, structure, and function desired for native longleaf forests and RCW habitat areas.

Thinning operations and site construction for the range and associated parking and access may cause some short-term negative effects to understory vegetation, but opening the canopy would allow the release of a diverse floral community in the long term. The availability of flashy fine fuels would increase over time as more sunlight reaches the forest floor, indirectly improving the effectiveness of prescribed burns integral to maintaining the longleaf ecosystem.

Except for inclusion in the Forest Service's routine prescribed burning program, no other actions have been authorized for the project area and none are anticipated in the foreseeable future. The project area was part of a larger seismic survey project within the past year and other timber harvest activities are authorized within the general forest area outside of the project area. Adverse cumulative effects are not expected based in part on implementation of best management practices and adherence to Forest Plan standards, along with the limited scope of this project.

Wildlife Resources: Selection of MIS (management indicator species) helps focus the effects of a Proposed Action, while considering potential impacts to a host of other species. Each MIS selected for a project helps indicate effects to other species who share similar habitat needs. The red-cockaded woodpecker is one of the MIS for the Conecuh National Forest and is listed as a federally endangered species by the US Fish & Wildlife Service. The RCW (red-cockaded woodpecker) is the MIS used in this analysis because it helps indicate management effects to mid- and late-successional pine forests and because the project area falls within the RCW Habitat Management Area prescription. Currently, there are 36 active colonies and 31 potential breeding pairs known on the Conecuh National Forest. The closest active RCW cluster is more than one mile from the project area. The current densities of the forested stands within the project area exceed desired levels for RCW foraging or nesting habitat.

If no action is taken, the project area would remain unsuitable habitat for the RCW. The thinning treatment proposed as a component of the Proposed Action would have a direct effect of providing approximately 65 acres of improved habitat for the RCW and other species native to the historic longleaf pine ecosystem of the coastal plain. It is likely that RCWs would begin to forage in the project area after implementation of the Proposed Action. Noise levels from ongoing range use is not expected to impact the RCW over the long term, based on observations of RCW on military bases near firing ranges of various ordinances. Given the proposed shooting range would be established in the existing borrow pit, no net loss of RCW habitat would occur from the Proposed Action.

The BE (Biological Evaluation) determined the potential effects of the Proposed Action on proposed, endangered, threatened and sensitive species. The BE determined the Proposed Action would have “no effect” on wood stork (*Mycteria americana*), flatwoods salamander (*Amylostoma cingulatum*), gulf sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi*), Eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon corais couperi*), pondberry (*Lindera melissifolia*), Louisiana quillwort (*Isoetes louisianensis*), red hills salamander (*Phaeognathus hubrichtii*), Alabama shad (*Alosa alabamae*), and gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*). The BE found the Proposed Action is “not likely to adversely affect” the RCW (*Picoides borealis*).

The BE also considered Regional Forester’s Sensitive Species. The analysis determined there would be no impact to Regional Forester’s Sensitive Species resulting from implementation of the Proposed Action.

Social Impacts:

Heritage Resources would not be affected because the Proposed Action, like all other project level work on the Conecuh, is designed to have no impact on heritage resources based on avoidance of the resource. A Forest Service archaeologist surveyed the project area to identify any sites potentially eligible for listing in the National Historic Register of Historic Places. Survey results were documented and reported to the State Historic Preservation Officer, who provided concurrence with Forest Service finding in March 2012. Implementation of the Proposed Action would have no impacts to cultural resources in the project area, nor contribute to cumulative effects of the resource across the Conecuh.

Public Safety was a primary consideration for the ID Team in development and assessment of the Proposed Action. The purpose of and need for action section of this document cites Forest Plan objectives for providing quality recreation opportunities on the National Forest. Safety is one of the factors to be considered when evaluating recreation quality. In addition, several public comments mentioned the topic of safety. Most advocates of the Proposed Action cited safety as one of the advantages of the Proposed Action. Some who petitioned for consideration to be given to reopening the former site on Highway 137 voiced their satisfaction with the site location or offered suggestions for additional mitigation measures to improve safety at that location. Even though consideration of the former Highway 137 site is outside the scope of this analysis, a discussion of the rationale for why suggested mitigation measures for that site are not feasible is found in the Issue Development section of this document (pages 3-4).

The ID Team considered several potential sites to establish a new shooting range across the Conecuh National Forest using a variety of selection criteria. Directly related to safety, down range distance and suitability became the limiting factor in the preliminary evaluation process. The Interim Policy on Shooting Ranges on National Forests in Alabama sets a downrange standard of a minimum of 5,500 yards (3.12 miles). The National Recreation & Parks Association standards call for up to a 3-mile safety zone for rifles, to accommodate direct firing distance. And the NRA Range Sourcebook lists the maximum firing range for rifles (.30-06 caliber) to be 3.12 miles or 5,500 yards. In addition, discussions with the State as a potential partner for construction of a proposed range were contingent upon a site location with 3 miles downrange suitability. Therefore, all potential sites were evaluated based on a goal of providing 3 miles of downrange property within the control of the Forest Service with a minimum of roads and trails present to maximize the potential for the safety of forest visitors and workers. The borrow pit site was developed into the Proposed Action because it best meets desired safety criteria, including 3 miles down range.

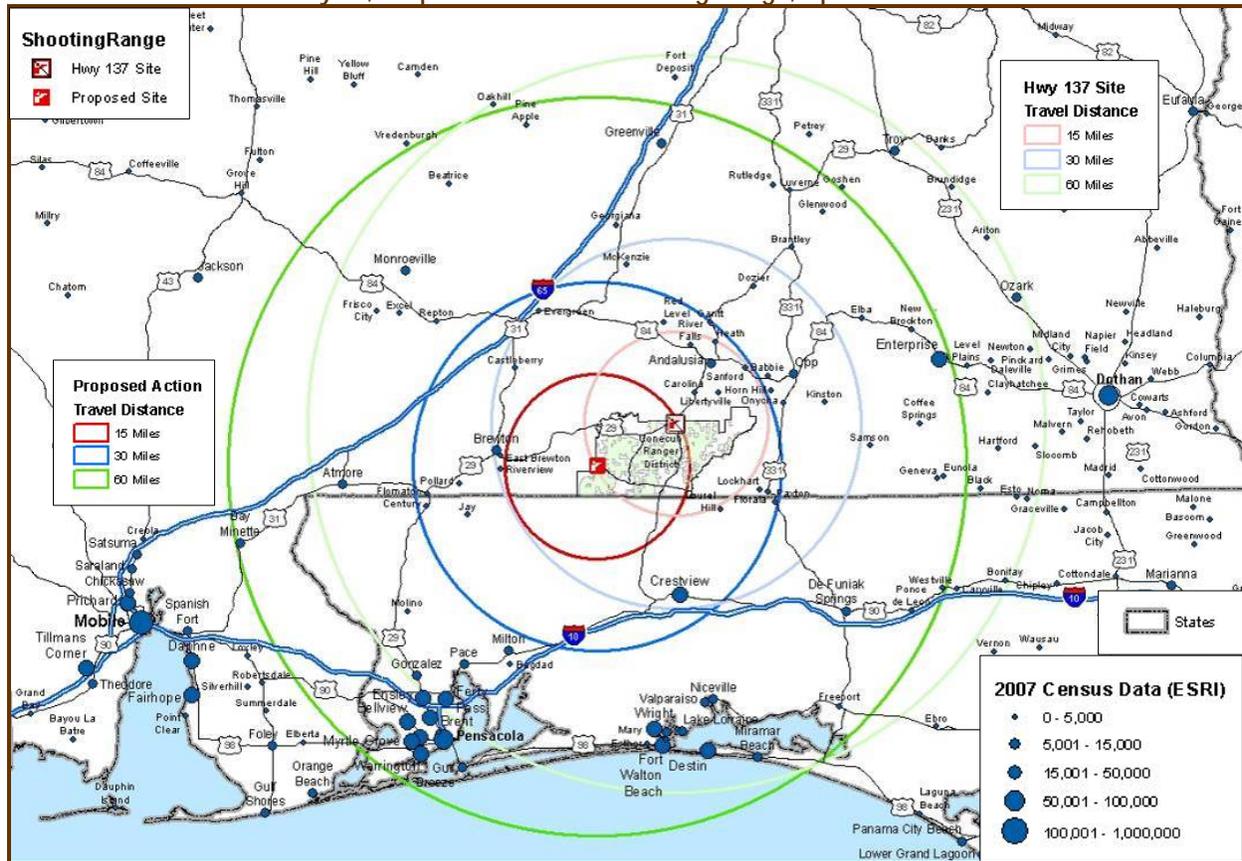
Public access would be restricted by closing the roads within the 3-mile downrange safety area. The affected roads would be nine dead end spur roads east and north of FS 300, FS 311LL, and FS 311U. The affected dead end roads off of FS 200 include: 300A, 300D, 300E, 300F, 300H, 300J, 300K, 300N, and 300Q. These 11 roads range in length from 0.2 to 1.2 miles each, totaling approximately 6 miles. Each is within the Conecuh's seasonal road closure program, currently. The Proposed Action would require public access of these roads to be prohibited year-round to provide for public safety down range of the proposed shooting range. Most of the affected roads are used infrequently. The longest (300A – 1.2 miles) is traveled more frequently. The primary purpose of most public access of this area is hunting.

Public travel distance is an issue raised in public comments about the Proposed Action. Those concerned about an increased travel distance identified themselves as past users of the now closed Highway 137 site who live in the Andalusia area and the Fort Walton Beach area. If the Proposed Action is implemented, Andalusia users would have to travel approximately 15 more miles than they did to reach the Highway 137 site. Those expressing this concern advocated the Highway 137 site be reopened or a shooting range established in an area that is closer to Andalusia; however, most were generally not opposed to a range being established at the Proposed Action site as well. Google Maps analysis shows slightly less travel distance from Fort Walton Beach (Fort Walton Beach midpoint to the proposed range site is 58 miles; to the closed Highway 137 site is 62 miles.). Comments from others stated the Proposed Action site would require about the same or less travel distance for them.

To broadly assess potential net impacts to range users relative to travel distance to the proposed range site, the ID Team compared population¹¹ in towns and cities within a 15-, 30-, and 60-mile radius between the closed Highway 137 site and the Proposed Action site. Although the Highway 137 site is not an alternative considered in this analysis, it is used to compare public travel distance of the Proposed Action alternative to that distance which users experienced with the former shooting range.

¹¹ Population numbers used in this analysis are 2007 Census Data, as presented in ESRI, Inc geographic information system public data. These data were the most recent available in a format that could be readily used for this analysis. Population data are for cities and towns only; rural population data was too dispersed to be used for this analysis.

Public Travel Distance Analysis, Proposed Conecuh Shooting Range, April 2012.



Public Travel Distance Population ¹ Comparison, Proposed Conecuh Shooting Range, April 2012.

Travel Distance Radius	Proposed Action Site	Highway 137 Site
15 miles	0 ²	10,426
30 miles	49,750	54,427
60 miles	493,853	305,081

¹ Population figures consist of census data for each town or city shown on the Public Travel Distance Analysis map. It does not include rural areas for which data were not amenable to this type of analysis.

² No city or town centers fall within a 15-mile radius of the proposed shooting range site; however, part of the East Brewton jurisdiction does fall within this radius and the centers of Brewton and Riverbend are within 1.5 miles of this circle. The population total for these three towns is 7,668.

Although some users will have further to travel to use the proposed range, results suggest similar numbers of users would be closer to the range, resulting in little net impact. Impacts to Andalusia range users are offset to a large extent by benefits to users from the Brewton area. Significant numbers of potential users in the Pensacola area would experience less travel distance to use the proposed Conecuh Shooting Range.

Civil Rights and Environmental Justice: There are no civil rights or environmental justice issues. This action has no effect on rights protected under civil rights law or environmental justice orders.

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM, CONTRIBUTORS, AND AGENCIES CONSULTED

The following lists document ID Team members, other National Forests in Alabama resource specialists who contributed to the process, and agencies contacted regarding the Proposed Action. The ID Team was responsible for carrying this project through environmental analysis and National Environmental Policy Act compliance. Several other resource specialists helped review and analyze the Proposed Action.

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Federal, State, and Local Agencies contacted:

Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division
Alabama Forestry Commission
Alabama State Historic Preservation Office
Covington and Escambia County (AL) Commissions
National Resource and Conservation Service, Andalusia, AL
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Daphne Field Office