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Forest
Service



Mark Twain
National Forest,
Region 9

June 2012

Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

GREASY CREEK PROJECT

Project Number: 35089
Ava/Cassville/Willow Springs Ranger District
Mark Twain National Forest
Douglas County, Missouri

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I. DECISION

INTRODUCTION

The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Greasy Creek Project is available for public review at the Ava/Cassville/Willow Springs Ranger District Office located at 1103 S. Jefferson Avenue, Ava, Missouri. This project is needed to address declines in forest health and native plant communities, and deteriorating Forest road conditions in the project area. The EA discusses, in depth, the reasons for considering these management activities and also analyses and discusses the environmental effects of proposed activities. The direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of proposed activities on the Greasy Creek Project area resources are described. Copies of the EA are available for review upon request.

The EA evaluates two alternatives for management activities on approximately 2,987 acres of National Forest land. The project area is located approximately five miles south of Cabool, Missouri (see attached map). The legal description for the area is T27N, R11W, Sections 9-11, 14-17, and 21-23 in Douglas County, Missouri. The 2005 Forest Plan places the project area under Management Prescriptions (MP) 2.1, General Forest, which emphasizes multiple use resource objectives by providing for enhancement of natural communities and improvement of forest health conditions, while allowing roaded natural recreation experiences.

DECISION

The purpose of the Decision Notice in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process is to identify a selected alternative and provide reasons why that alternative was selected over others considered in the Environmental Assessment (EA). The EA for the Greasy Creek Project evaluated two alternatives. In my opinion, the analysis provided all the information I need to make a reasonable, informed decision about managing this area in a way that complies with the 2005 Forest Plan.

In accordance with 36 CFR 215.5(a), the Responsible Official has discretion in determining the most effective time to provide notice under 36 CFR 215.5(b). Based upon my review of the alternatives, I have decided to implement the actions described as Alternative 2.

Under Alternative 2, the project area will undergo the management activities shown in Table 1 below. Opportunities for improvement will occur in regards to vegetation management, roads management, prescribed fire, wildlife habitat enhancement, and non-native invasive species control.

Approximately 4.9 miles of FS system roads and 2.5 miles of non-system roads will be managed under this decision. Approximately 8.6 miles of temporary roads will be constructed to support vegetation management in the area. Vegetation management will occur in 67 timber stands comprising approximately (ca.) 2580 acres. Additionally, pine will be planted in 7 stands comprising ca. 328 acres. Openland maintenance, including haying, will occur in one stand involving ca. 12 acres and noxious weeds will be controlled on ca. 31 acres. One pond will be rehabilitated, five will be maintained, and ten vernal pools will be constructed. Prescribed fire will be implemented on ca. 2,422 acres. Approximately 3.6 miles of fireline will be constructed

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to assist with application of prescribed fire. Trash dump removal will occur throughout the project area as needed, and as spoiled areas continue to be detected.

Table 1. Summary of activities to be implemented by this decision (Alternative 2).

Proposed Activities	Measures (Estimated)
Road Management	
System road maintenance: (system roads 129 (1.4 mi), 427 (1.2 mi), 428 (0.3 mi))	2.9 miles
System road reconstruction: 427 (0.8 mi).	0.8 miles
Non-system road converted to system road with reconstruction: 427 (0.5 mi), 428 (0.2), 14145 (0.2 mi),	0.9 miles
Decommission system roads: 129 (1.2 mi).	1.2 miles
Decommission non-system roads not under special use permit.	1.1 miles
Special Use Permits Road Maintenance (two roads)	0.5 miles
Vegetation and Wildlife Habitat Management	
Clear Cuts with Reserves	18 acres (1 stand)
Shelterwood Cuts with Reserves	22 acres (1 stand)
Thinning	180 acres (5 stands)
Overstory Removal	32 acres (1 stand)
Salvage/Sanitation (intermediate treatment, not regeneration)	1,480 acres (28 stands)
Salvage/Sanitation (heavy salvage cut, regeneration activities required)	378 acres (12 stands)
Timber Stand Improvement	470 acres (19 stands)
Maintain existing ponds	<1 acre each 5 ponds
Construct 10 vernal pools	<1 acre total 10 ponds
Rehabilitate 1 intermittent shallow pond	Approx. 1 acre 1 pond
Openland maintenance (haying)	12 acres (1 stand)
Pine planting	328 acres (7 stands)
Prescribed fire	2,422 acres

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Proposed Activities	Measures (Estimated)
Noxious weed control: hand pulling, herbicide spot treatments, boom sprayer, and/or mowing.	31 acres
Connected Actions	
Fireline construction	3.6 miles
Temporary road construction	8.6 miles
Trash dump removal	As needed

As a result of this decision, natural communities within the project area will be enhanced by maintaining most of the existing shortleaf pine in the overstory and encouraging pine regeneration on ridges and side slopes. Within riparian areas, the natural communities are largely in good condition and no vegetation management activities are currently needed. General forest health will be improved by management activities that remove declining, mature, and fire-damaged trees. A combination of commercial harvest, non-commercial treatments, and prescribed fire will be used to move the area toward the desired condition. The desired condition consists of a variety of stand sizes, shapes, crown closures, and age structures in a pattern that simulates the structural variability of natural community types similar to historical vegetative patterns. This decision will move the project area toward this goal while providing roaded recreation access to dispersed recreation areas.

Standards and Guidelines are management direction that applies to a particular management prescription, in addition to the Forestwide Standards and Guidelines. Where Forestwide standards and guidelines are different from those for a management prescription, the management prescription standard applies. A Standard is defined as a course of action or a level of attainment that must be reached to achieve Forestwide goals. A Guideline is a course of action that should be followed in most circumstances; however, Guidelines relate to activities where site-specific factors may require some flexibility. Standards and Guidelines for the affected management area are provided below. Bolded text refers to Standards, while regular text refers to guidelines.

Standards and Guidelines for MP 2.1 that apply to this decision include the following:

Recreation Management

- **Manage area to meet, as a minimum, roaded natural ROS objectives.**

Visual Management

- **All resource management activities shall meet, as the minimum, the Visual Quality Objectives stipulated for MP 2.1 (Table 3-4, page 3-12, 2005 Forest Plan).**

Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines that may apply to this decision were discussed in detail in Chapter 1 of the Greasy Creek Project Environmental Assessment, and also are provided in Chapter 2 of the 2005 Forest Plan, pages 2-1 through 2-42.

II. REASONS FOR THE DECISION

I have chosen Alternative 2 because the analysis shows that it is the best alternative for addressing the major issues identified during the scoping and analysis phases of the project, namely: maintaining shortleaf pine; protecting caves, springs, sinkholes, and riparian areas; and resolving declines in forest health and native plant communities. Additionally, this alternative provides solutions to the deteriorating Forest road conditions in the project area.

Specifically, my reasons for choosing Alternative 2 are as follows:

1. The analysis and project record effectively demonstrates that Alternative 2 best meets the issues addressed by the Interdisciplinary Team while moving the area toward meeting the project purpose, need, and future desired conditions (EA, pp. 11-12 and 16).
2. The analysis demonstrates that Alternative 2 best meets the goals of Management Prescription 2.1 (EA, p. 10; and 2005 Forest Plan, 3-3 to 3-7).
3. Alternative 2 addresses forest health concerns related to age, decline, species composition, and stocking while improving growing conditions for residual trees (EA, pp. 17-19 and 61-71).
4. The salvage treatments in Alternative 2 would create early successional habitat and additional growing space for regenerating stands (EA, pp. 17-19 and 61-71).
5. Alternative 2 will improve open woodland conditions for management indicator species (MIS), including northern bobwhite, summer tanager, Bachman's sparrow, and eastern red bat (EA, pp. 61-71; and Forest Plan Objective 1.4a, 2005 Forest Plan, p. 1-4).
6. Alternative 2 promotes regeneration of shortleaf pine, a primary component of the historical vegetation community; thereby, assisting in maintaining pine as a component of the naturally-occurring vegetation of the region (EA, pp. 17 and 61-71).
7. Alternative 2 uses a combination of prescribed fire and mechanical thinning to reduce hazardous fuels and improve Fire Regime Condition Class; thereby, reducing the risk for catastrophic wildfires (EA, pp. 17, 19 and 45-50; and Forest Plan Objective 2.2b, 2005 Forest Plan, p. 1-5).
8. Alternative 2 identifies Forest Service system and non-system roads for maintenance, reconstruction, closure, and reclassification where recreation, safety, protection of natural resources, and concerns of area landowners are addressed (EA, pp. 17-18 and 75-81).
9. Alternative 2 will improve the visual quality of the project area by reducing slash and enhancing sight distance (EA, pp.81-85).
10. Alternative 2 will provide goods and services to the local economy in the form of wood products, forage, wildlife habitats, and dispersed recreation (EA, pp. 71-75).

This decision provides opportunities to perform natural community enhancement, wildlife habitat improvement, fuels reduction, and ecosystem restoration in response to challenges noted during the scoping process. I am confident based on my review of the EA that Alternative 2 provides the best solution for addressing the project's purpose and need, as well as issues brought forward during project scoping and analysis.

SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND CONCERNS

An issue is defined as a point of disagreement, debate, or dispute about the proposed action based on effects identified through scoping. Preliminary issues and concerns were raised and three key issues were identified. The alternatives developed by the Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) demonstrate that efforts were made to be responsive to the variety of issues and concerns identified during scoping. Specifically these issues and concerns were:

Issue 1: Maintaining shortleaf pine: Shortleaf pine was once the predominant overstory species in portions of this area. Pine currently is being replaced by hardwoods.

Under Alternative 2, pine would be planted on 328 acres (EA, pp. 17-19 and 61-71).

Issue 2: Protection of caves, springs, sinkholes, and riparian areas: There are no known caves within the project area boundaries; although, there are caves nearby. Springs, sinkholes and riparian areas occur within the project area. Due to the area's karst topography, it is important that these features are protected to maintain their natural functions.

Alternative 2 would protect caves, springs, sinkholes, and riparian areas from potential damage due to resource management activities (EA Appendix A – Timber Harvest Standards and Guidelines, p. A-3).

Issue 3: Declining forest health: The general health of the forest in this area is declining from a combination of factors. A major component of forest stands in the project area is red oak species. These trees have reached physiological maturity and are declining.

Alternative 2 would provide opportunities to improve forest health through salvage, timber stand improvement, regeneration, and tree planting (EA, pp. 17-19 and 61-71).

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED AND REASONS WHY THEY WERE NOT SELECTED

Two alternatives were considered in detail during the analysis. A description of Alternative 1 and rationale for not selecting this alternative is provided below:

Alternative 1

This alternative provided a baseline or reference point against which to describe environmental effects of Alternative 2. This was a viable alternative and responded to concerns of those who would not want activities associated with the project to be implemented. If this alternative had been selected, it would not have foreclosed options for future management on the area.

If Alternative 1 had been selected, current and on-going management activities would have continued, but no new federal activities would have been initiated without additional National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analyses. Changes such as road maintenance might have occurred through current management direction, natural processes, or future management direction.

Rationale – I did not select Alternative 1 for the following reasons:

1. The condition of Forest Service lands within the project area would not be improved and forest health would continue to decline for many years due to forest insects and diseases.

The entire area would progress toward old growth timber; which is, for the most part, uniform and unproductive wildlife habitat.

2. Prescribed burning of Forest Service lands would not be implemented within the project area. Fuel loads would increase along with proliferation of brushy undergrowth and unproductive understory species. Beneficial forbs and woodland grasses would decline.
3. Opportunities to improve the Forest Service road system would not occur in the project area. Access to the area via non-system roads and the potential for continued soils erosion would remain unchecked.
4. Wildlife habitat would continue to decline for many years within the project. Species diversity would decrease due to habitat loss.
5. Non-native and invasive plant species would not be managed in the project area, and proliferation of noxious weeds would continue.

III. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Public Comment Package - Greasy Creek Project was mailed on May 5, 2011 to 157 interested and affected parties to invite comment on the proposed action. A legal notice advertising the availability of the project proposal for public comment was published in the Springfield News-Leader on May 6, 2011. Project documents for review by the public have been posted on the Mark Twain National Forest web-site since May 2011 and the project is listed on the Forest-wide Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA). The District Ranger received comments from 5 individuals on proposed activities that were presented in the public comment package. All comments received were reviewed by the District Ranger and the IDT.

Two individuals were jointly concerned that a portion of the proposed project area adjoined their property and that proposed activities might impact the value of their property. They also stated that the project was a “good idea” and would “greatly improve the forest.” One respondent supported the proposed activities but thought that a “mud pit” in the northern portion of the project area needed to be drained and protected from further damage caused by sport “mudding” in that area. One respondent stated that letters used to notify the public of the availability of the project for public comment were insufficient and that web-posting of project documents also is inadequate. One respondent was concerned that the aesthetic quality along Blue Buck Knob Scenic Byway would be affected; also, that no “old growth” timber was being designated in the project area. One respondent provided information on privately-owned caves in the vicinity of the project area. Detailed responses to comments can be found in the project record and are available by request.

The IDT developed the issues and alternatives analyzed in the Environmental Assessment (EA) based on internal and external issues brought forward during project scoping and comments received during the 30-day comment period. No new issues were identified during the 30-day comment period and no new alternatives were developed as a result. This EA has been prepared as permitted by our revised regulations for notice, comment, and appeal (36 CFR 215, published in the Federal Register Vol. 68, No. 107, pages 33581-33602). Detailed responses to these comments can be found in the project record and are available to the public by request.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

I have determined that this project is being conducted in a manner that does not exclude persons from participation in, deny the benefits of, or subject persons to discrimination because of their racial, ethnic, or economic status. The activities carried out by this decision will not have disproportionately high and adverse health or environmental effects on minority or low-income populations.

Based on the review of demographic racial characteristics of the population of the county's communities and how they compare with suggested threshold levels of concern, there is little reason to suspect that these communities might fall under the provisions of Executive Order 12898. This project will have no direct or cumulative effects on minorities and low-income populations. Neither of the two alternatives pose a disproportionate high nor adverse environmental, human health, economic or social effects on Douglas County and the vicinity (EA, p. 58-60).

V. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have determined, based on the discussion of effects in the Environmental Analysis, and from experience with similar activities, that these actions are not a major federal action, individually or cumulatively, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. No additional analysis or studies need to be conducted for me to make a determination. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed. This determination is based on the following factors:

1. There will be no significant effects, beneficial or adverse, resulting from this project. The environmental effects are discussed in the Environmental Assessment. The beneficial effects include: a) enhanced condition of natural communities and reduced hazardous fuels, b) increased timber and wood products to the economy, c) reduced populations of non-native and invasive plant species, d) a safe and efficient transportation system with reduced soils erosion risk. There were no significant adverse effects to the environment identified in the environmental analysis. There were no known significant irretrievable commitments of resources such as loss of soil productivity, water quality, wildlife habitat, or recreational opportunities. Beneficial effects of the action do not bias my finding of no significant effects.
2. Public health and safety will be improved by the proposed actions. The removal of salvageable timber, including standing hazard trees, would reduce the potential for injury from falling debris around roads and trails. The removal of fuels will also improve the FRCC and augment safety conditions for wildland fire suppression (EA, pp. 45-50). The potential detrimental effects of the "no action" alternative are also discussed.
3. There will be no significant adverse effects to prime farmlands, floodplains, wetlands, historic or cultural resources, wild and scenic rivers, ecologically critical areas, civil rights, women, or minority groups. The Environmental Assessment discusses the anticipated effects of implementing these actions (EA, Chapter 3).
4. Based on public participation and the involvement of resource specialists, I believe effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. This

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does not mean that the decision to proceed with the project will be acceptable to all people, as some will probably find that their needs and interests are not served by the selected alternative. However, it is my professional judgment that physical, biological, social, and economic issues have been addressed well enough for me to make an informed decision. The proposed actions are similar to other management activities recently implemented on the Ava/Cassville/Willow Springs Ranger District and on the Mark Twain National Forest; therefore the results are reasonably predictable (EA, Chapter 3).

5. There are no known effects on the human environment that are highly uncertain, or involve unique or unknown risks. Similar projects have occurred in the general area; and more specifically, on the Mark Twain National Forest. Environmental effects described in the assessment have been analyzed in enough detail to determine predictable results.
6. These actions are similar to other management activities previously implemented and do not set a precedent for other projects that may be proposed to meet the goals and objectives of the 2005 Forest Plan.
7. There are no known significant cumulative effects between this project and other projects implemented or planned on areas separated from the affected area of this project beyond those evaluated in the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the 2005 Mark Twain Forest Plan. Cumulative effects are evaluated for each resource in Chapter 3 of the EA.
8. This decision takes into account both known and unknown historic properties [as defined in 36 CFR Part 800.16(1)] within the project area. Cultural resources investigations were carried out using the methodology outlined in 36 CFR Part 800.4. In a letter dated April 27, 2012 (Project Record) the Missouri State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) stated, “We also concur that there will be **no adverse effect** on the condition that the mitigation measures as discussed in the DOEE are implemented.” This concurrence was in response to the Determination of Eligibility and Effect (DOEE) Report No. R2012-09-05-25-177. This project should not cause significant impacts to cultural resources.
9. Based on the, Biological Evaluation for the Greasy Creek Project (EA, Appendix C) which analyzed impacts to federally-listed Threatened and Endangered Species, the MTNF had a determination of “May Affect –Not Likely to Adversely Affect” for Indiana bats; and a determination of “May Affect –Not Likely to Adversely Affect” for gray bats. On March 21, 2012, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with this determination.
10. The actions do not threaten a violation of federal, state, or local law, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The EA complies with the Forest Plan, Environmental Protection Agency, Missouri Department of Natural Resources, and Missouri State and National Historic Preservation Act.
11. The best available and most current scientific information was taken into account and appropriately evaluated and applied appropriately in this analysis.

VI. FINDINGS RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

I find that the actions of this decision comply with the requirements of the National Forest Management Act of 1976 and the 2005 Forest Plan. This decision is consistent with the Forest Plan's goals and objectives, management direction for Management Prescriptions 2.1 and the Forest-wide Standards and Guidelines. I have also reviewed Chapter 3 of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the 2005 MTNF Forest Plan titled "Affected Environment and Environmental Effects," and have concluded that the environmental effects associated with the project are consistent with those described in the FEIS. This decision is subject to the 2005 Planning Rule and Forest Service Manuals (FSM) 1920 and 1922.

My decision is based on a review of the record that shows consideration of relevant scientific information, including responsible opposing views; and as appropriate, the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk. My decision implements the 2005 Mark Twain National Forest Plan. As required by NFMA Section 1604(i), I find this project to be consistent with the Plan.

VII. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.11 (as published in the Federal Register, June 4, 2003). A written Notice of Appeal must be postmarked or received within **45 days** after the date of publication of this decision in the *Springfield News-Leader* at the following address:

USDA Forest Service, Eastern Region
ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer (ADO), Teresa Chase
Gaslight Building, Suite 700
626 E. Wisconsin Ave
Milwaukee, WI 53202-4616

or **Email:** appeals-eastern-regional-office@fs.fed.us - **Subject:** Greasy Creek Project

or **Fax:** 414-944-3963 **ATTN:** Appeal Deciding Officer, USDA Forest Service, Eastern Region

Normal business hours (for hand-delivered appeals) are 7:30 am – 4:00 pm, Mon-Fri. Electronic appeals should be in TXT, RTF, DOC, PDF, or other Microsoft Office-compatible formats.

Appeals must meet the content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14.

VIII. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If we receive an appeal, implementation may not occur for 15 business days following the date of the appeal disposition.

Further information on this decision can be obtained at:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/mtnf/projects> or by contacting Allen Weathersbee at the Ava/Cassville/Willow Springs, Ranger District: P.O. Box 188, Ava, Missouri 65608; (417) 683-4428; fax (417) 683-5722, e-mail: aaweathersbee@fs.fed.us.

IX. SIGNATURE AND DATE

/s/ Jenny Farenbaugh

JENNY FARENBAUGH
District Ranger
Ava/Cassville/Willow Springs Ranger District

6/20/2012

Date

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