

Decision Notice and  
Finding of No Significant Impact

Soldier Bay Analysis Area  
U.S. Forest Service  
Compartments 312, 326, and 328  
Wakulla Ranger District  
**APALACHICOLA NATIONAL FOREST**  
Wakulla County, Florida

**DECISION**

Based upon my review of the Soldier Bay Environmental Assessment (EA) and supporting documents, I have decided to implement Alternative B with the following modifications:

**Table 1. List of changes to original proposed action**

Stand	Original Proposal	Modified Proposal
Compartment 312 stands 10, 15, and 23 ; Compartment 326 stands 7, 14 and 23 ; Compartment 328 stand 1	Thin to 40 BA and herbicide treatment	Only herbicide treatment
Compartment 326 stands 20 and 28 ; Compartment 328 stand 16, 26, 34, 46, 88, and 97	Thin to 40 BA	No treatment
All remaining stands proposed for thinning	Thin to 40 BA	All remaining stands proposed for thinning will be thinned to 50 BA

These modifications are further discussed on p. 5-6 below. I have concluded that these changes will not result in any effects that were not already considered in the EA and therefore, do not constitute new information that requires additional analysis or public involvement.

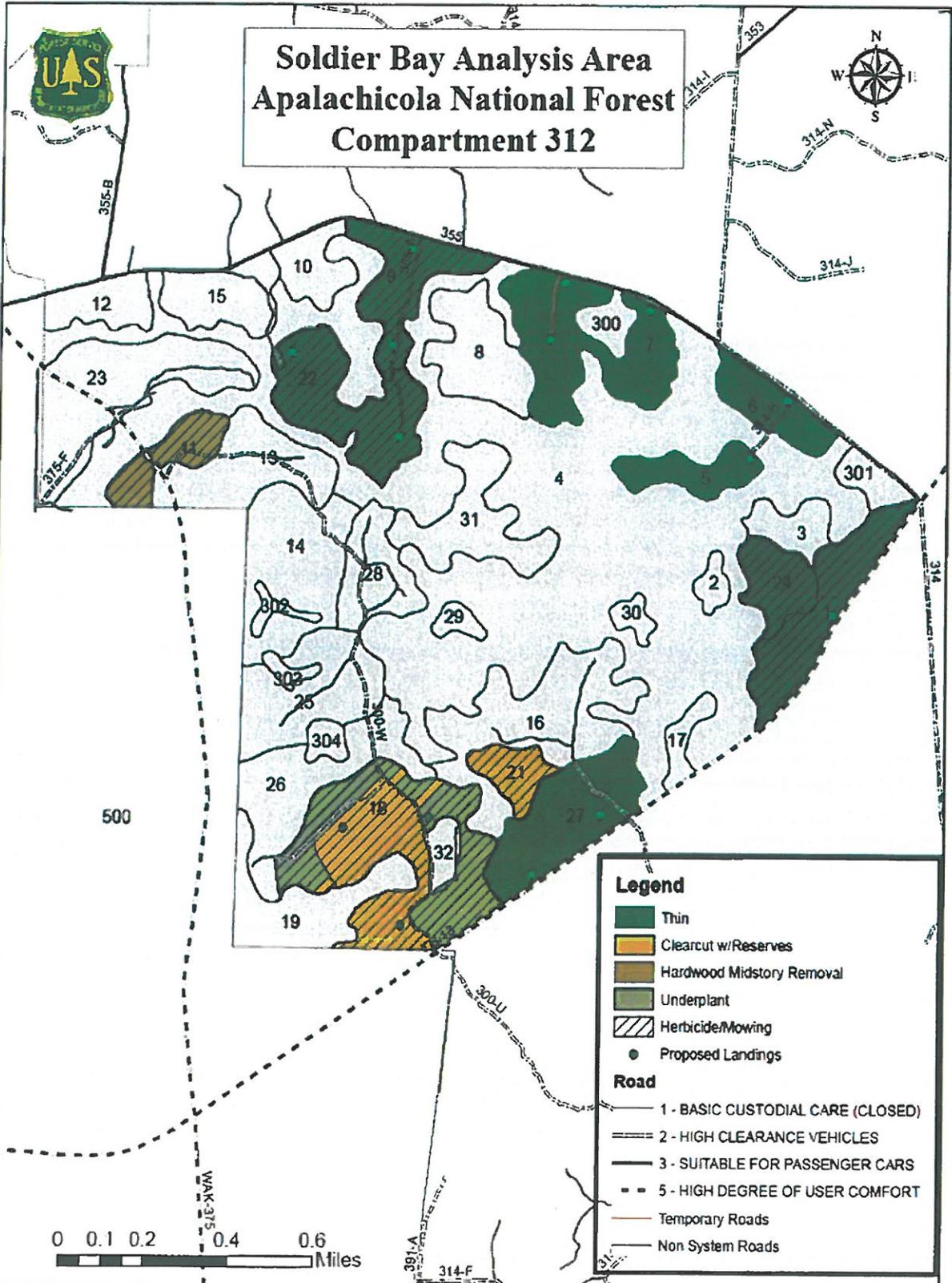
The complete treatment actions are as follows:

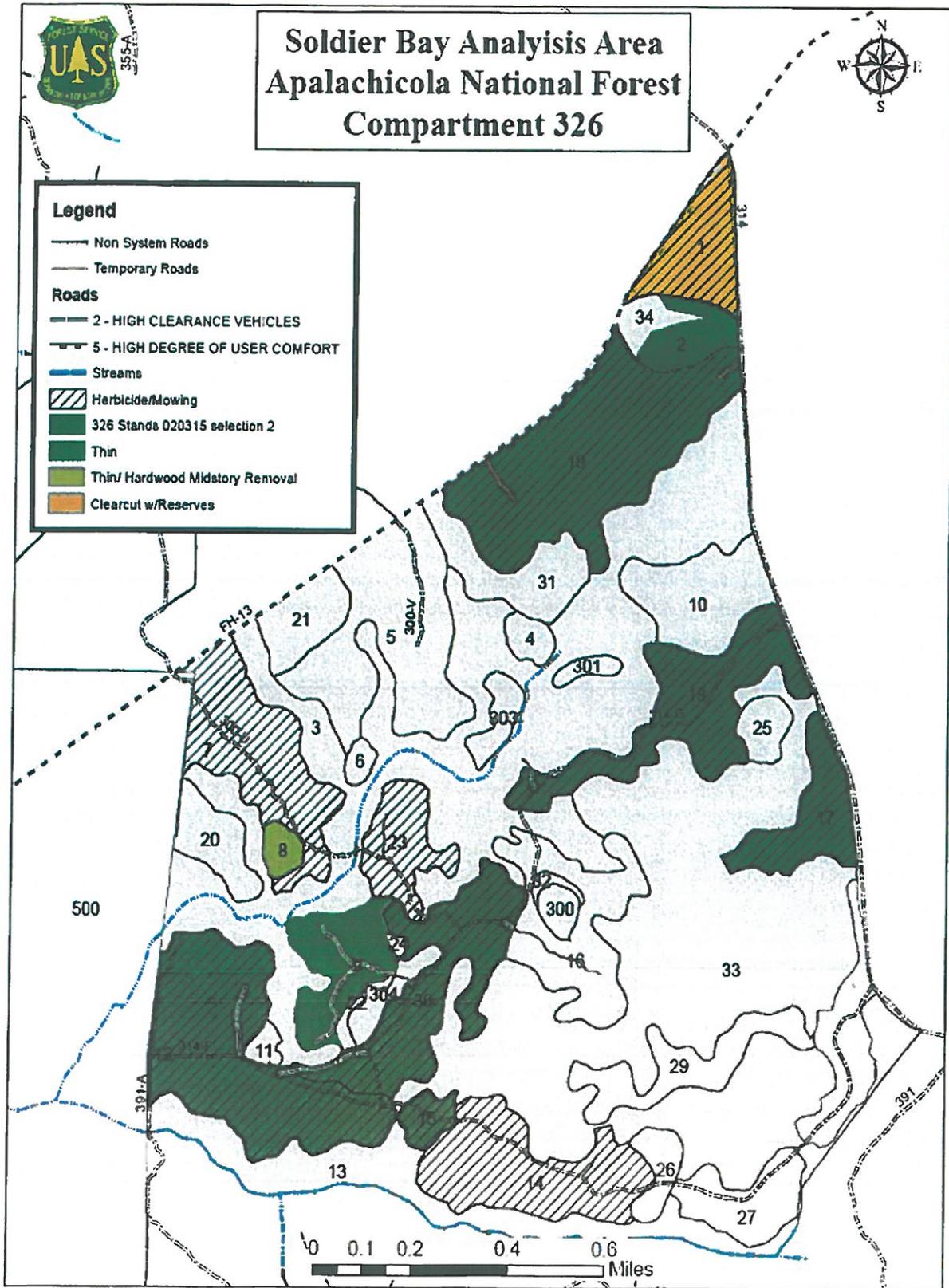
- First or intermediate thinning of approximately 1562 acres of slash and longleaf pine stands. Stands will be thinned to 50 BA to reduce fuels, open the forest canopy, and promote the establishment of herbaceous groundcover species.

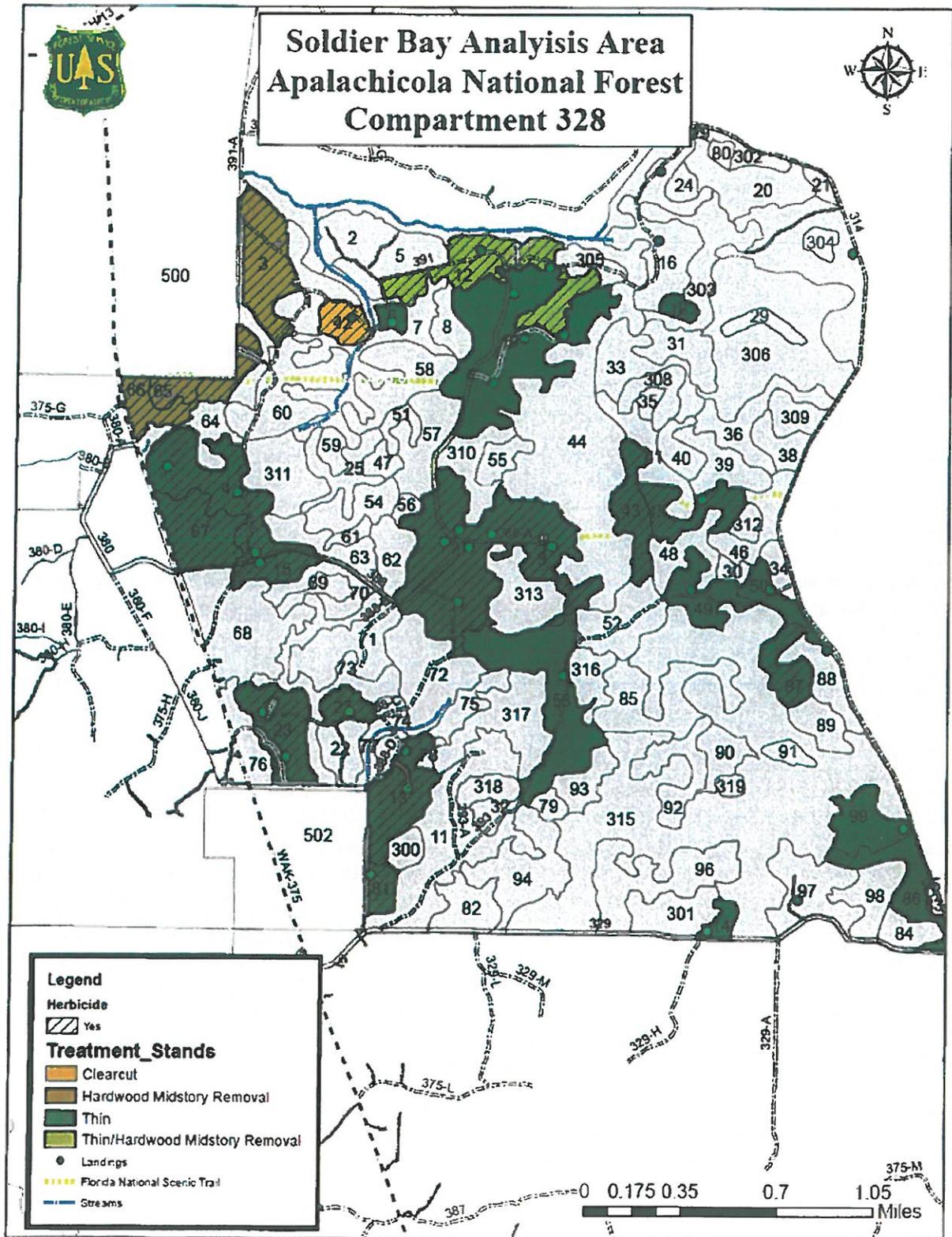
- Conversion of 151 acres of stagnant off-site slash pine plantations to longleaf pine. Approximately 92 acres will be converted using clearcuts with reserves. All on-site longleaf pine will be reserved during clearcut operations. Approximately 59 acres will be converted by underplanting longleaf under existing stagnated slash pine.
- Restore groundcover by hand planting or seeding wiregrass on 92 acres.
- Conducting fuel reduction treatments on approximately 1434 acres using herbicide and/or mechanical equipment to promote herbaceous groundcover growth and reduce wildfire heavy fuels. The herbicides hexazinone, triclopyr, and glyphosate will be used in combination as needed to reduce woody fuels throughout the stand. The combination of herbicide would give the Forest Service full flexibility in addressing woody understory response following timber harvest. If the herbaceous response is favorable herbicide would not be applied. The hexazinone treatments will be applied on a 6'X6' spot grid at a rate of 3 quarts per acre. Triclopyr and glyphosate will be foliar applied. This will not be a broadcast application of herbicide but rather a targeted spot treatment, as needed.
- Site prep of 151 acres using herbicide and/or mechanical equipment using triclopyr, glyphosate, and/or hexazinone. This will not be a broadcast application of herbicide. Treatments will be done by application on a 6'X6' spot grid, strip application, or spot foliar treatment, as needed.
- Planting of 151 acres of longleaf pine seedlings.
  - Longleaf seedlings will be released (if needed) mechanically with brush saws and/or with the herbicide triclopyr.
- Restoring eroded soils on temporary roads and log landing where necessary.
- Reconstruction of FNST trailhead for adequate parking for 3 passenger vehicles parallel to Forest Road 314 and trail maintenance such as hazard tree removal, mowing, blazing and signage.

Connected actions necessary to facilitate the proposed action include maintenance of 4.67 miles of landlines, reconstruction of approximately 13.99 miles of system roads, temporary improvement and use of approximately 1.0 miles of non-system which provide access to pine plantations, and the maintenance of approximately 8.11 miles of system roads used to haul timber products from the analysis area. For duration of the operations, the FNST trail would be temporarily detoured to follow existing corridors (i.e. forest roads, landlines, utility lines, etc.) for public health and safety.

If approved, these actions would take place in Compartments 312, 326, and 328 of the Wakulla Ranger District, Apalachicola National Forest in Wakulla County, Florida within the next 3-5 years.







## COORDINATION MEASURES

Coordination measures were incorporated into the design of the project to reduce the risk of potential impacts to the physical, biological, and social-economic environments. These measures include all applicable Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines (USDA, 1999, p. 3.1-3.32), particularly those described below.

### Proposed, Endangered, Threatened and Sensitive (PETS) Species

- If modifications are made in the project, or if additional information regarding the effects of the project on listed species becomes available, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) would be notified and informal consultation would be reinitiated if the USFWS or the FS determines it is needed.
- Contracts would contain penalty clauses to protect white-banded RCW trees.
- If possible, temporary roads, log decks, and skid trails would be located outside of active or inactive RCW clusters (except for skidding timber out of clusters).
- Log decks should be located no closer than 200 ft. from RCW cavity trees.
- Timber and road contracts will prohibit harvest, hauling, and/or roadwork within active Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) clusters during the nesting season, April 1 through July 31. Exceptions will be made for hauling and/or roadwork on major numbered roads and highways (FS Level 5, 4, 3 Roads). Exceptions will also be made during nesting season if a biologist determines through direct observation that the cluster is no longer active, there is not a pair, or the young have fledged before July 31.
- **WL-11**—In all timber sale unit openings clearly mark a 25-foot buffer around the entrance to every gopher tortoise burrow. Keep heavy equipment out of this buffer zone during both harvesting and regeneration (USDA 1999b).
- Purchasers and contractors will be advised of the possible presence of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species and will be instructed to avoid harming any wildlife they encounter, including snakes.
- Equipment cleaning measures would be required by contracts to prevent the introduction of non-native invasive plants.
- To protect aquatic species; pesticide application, timber harvesting activities, and road maintenance will adhere to the standards of Florida's Silvicultural Best Management Practices (BMPs). For a detailed discussion of these practices, see the Silviculture BMP Manual: [http://freshfromflorida.s3.amazonaws.com/silvicultural\\_bmp\\_manual.pdf](http://freshfromflorida.s3.amazonaws.com/silvicultural_bmp_manual.pdf)

### Heritage Resources

- **HE-1** If any cultural resources are discovered during operations all ground-disturbing activity will cease. The Forest Archeologist will determine changes to be made to the project before work resumes (USDA 1999b).
- **HE-9** Known cultural resource sites will be protected by timber sale contract and no ground-disturbing activities will occur in these areas, which may include segments of roads (USDA 1999b).

### Public Health and Safety

- Use herbicides in accordance with registration label. Place herbicide notice signs at treatment sites. Herbicide notice signs (FSH 7109.11) would be clearly posted, and would include the application date, the herbicide used, and safe reentry date. Private lands would not be treated. No herbicide would be applied within 100 feet of private land. No herbicide would be applied within 100 feet of any public or domestic water source.
- The Pesticide Use Handbook (FSH 2109.14) and the Health and Safety Code Handbook (FSH 6709.11) would be used as guidance for workers. Workers who apply herbicides would be trained to ensure minimum impacts and maximum effectiveness. Only those methods that assure proper application of herbicides would be used. Herbicide application by contract and/or in-house personnel would be performed by or directly supervised by the holder of a current Federal Pesticide Applicator's license following all current legal application procedures administered by the USDA Forest Service and the label on the herbicide container.

### Soil & Water

- **WA-1** Adhere to standards of Florida's Silvicultural Best Management Practices (BMPs). For a detailed discussion of these practices, see the Silviculture BMP Manual: [http://freshfromflorida.s3.amazonaws.com/silvicultural\\_bmp\\_manual.pdf](http://freshfromflorida.s3.amazonaws.com/silvicultural_bmp_manual.pdf)
- **WA-2** Three perennial streams are located within the analysis area (Smith Creek, North Branch, and Arbor Bush Branch) and drain into the Ochlockonee River. A 35-foot Special/Streamside Management Zone (SMZ) will be required in the following areas (LRMP, 3-24): Compartment 312 Stands 11, 15, and 23; Compartment 326 stands 7, 9, 12, 14, 23 and 28; and Compartment 328 Stands 1, 6, 42, and 77. No operation of heavy equipment will occur during periods when weather and soil conditions will promote excessive rutting or compaction.
- Forest Plan standard WA-6: Restrict soil compacting activities, including logging traffic when the water table is within 12 inches of the surface, or when soil moisture exceeds the plastic limits (USDA 1999b).

### Vegetation

- **VG-37** - Control invasive terrestrial and aquatic weeds. Do not apply herbicides within 60 feet of any PETS plant species unless analysis indicate herbicide use is the best way to protect PETS plants from invasive weeds (USDA 1999b). Contract specifications for equipment cleaning will be placed in contracts to prevent the introduction of exotic plants.
- **VG-18** - Minimize soil-disturbing site preparation in longleaf and slash pine sites. When disturbance is necessary to achieve the desired future conditions, use methods that displace no more than 10 percent of the soil surface in the treated area. The objective should be to maintain the integrity of the native herbaceous vegetation (especially wiregrass) overtime (USDA 1999b).
- Follow guidelines for planning and applying herbicides (USDA 1999a).

### Visual Quality

- **VG-15** - To enhance visual quality, require that slash, tops, and logging debris be piled no more than 2 feet high within 100 feet of levels A and B roads and the congressionally designated trail. Stands 1, 6, 7, 9, 18, and 27 in compartment 312; stands 1, 2, 17, 18, 19, and 28 in compartment 326; and stands 4, 14, 28, 50, 66, 67, 86, and 302 of compartment 328 meet this criteria.

### **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

This proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions for National Forests in Florida beginning the 4th Quarter of Fiscal Year 2014. Initial scoping was completed in November 2014 by sending a letter and treatment map to the forest scoping list requesting comments on the draft proposed action and posting of project documents to the National Forests in Florida website. A 30 day notice and comment period was initiated December 14, 2015 with the publishing of a legal notice in the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Several comments were received during both scoping and the notice and comment period. Issues raised included: the type and quantity of herbicides used, rationale behind underplanting, particulate matter impacts to residents of Tallahassee during burning, impacts of clearcutting, use of the broad scale 40 BA prescription, and burn frequency. On March 30, 2016, pursuant 36 CFR 218 subparts A and B, the Forest Service published the EA and draft decision notice (DN) for the 45 day objection period. One objection to the project was received that met all content and requirements outlined in 36 CFR §218.8. The modifications to the proposed action in Table 1 are the result of dialogue between the objectors and the Forest Service, including a meeting held June 29, 2016. The objection reviewing official, Kelly Russell, Forest Supervisor for the National Forests in Florida, provided a written resolution to the objection by email on July 14, 2016. This decision incorporates all of the changes described in that letter, as required by 36 CFR 218.12.

### **DECISION RATIONALE**

The primary purpose of this project is to reduce fuels in the wildland urban interface and to improve future habitat for threatened and endangered species by: thinning both longleaf and slash pine stands and applying herbicide to remove understory and midstory woody vegetation to restore native herbaceous groundcover. Secondary benefits include improved current and future habitat for PETS species such as the RCW through vegetation management. Given the analysis area's proximity to the Bradwell Bay Wilderness and the associated wildfire history, there is a need to treat overstocked stands with excessive wildfire fuels to protect the surrounding Smith Creek community. A need also exists to maintain and improve habitat conditions for threatened and endangered species.

Thinning overstocked stands of longleaf and slash pine stands in conjunction with prescribed fire will open the forest floor to sunlight and promote herbaceous groundcover establishment and growth. A more herbaceous understory will allow for a shorter return interval for prescribed fire. These stands will also become healthier and more productive while trending towards future habitat for the RCW. Alternative A for the Soldier Bay project includes clearcuts with reserves in

four stands that are currently stunted slash pine plantations. I have decided is to prepare the site with herbicide to control competition from woody vegetation such as gallberry, and then plant longleaf pine seedlings and wiregrass. This sequence of management activities has been successful for establishing longleaf pine and is acceptable under both the Forest Plan and the RCW Recovery Plan. The RCW foraging habitat analysis for the Soldier Bay project BA shows that that these activities were not likely to adversely affect RCW according to the analysis guidelines. Underplanting the eastern half of compartment 312 stand 18 will be implemented under alternative B. Underplanting was determined to be the best option for stand conversion due to the higher quality groundcover, low crown cover provided by the overstory stunted slash pines, and clearcut limitations outlined in the RCW recovery plan. Clearcutting the western half of stand 18 and stand 21 in compartment 312, compartment 312 stand 1, and compartment 326 stand 42 was deemed the optimal method of regeneration for these areas due to higher density of stunted trees present on the sites.

Supplementing groundcover grasses by planting wiregrass plugs will hasten the recovery of the groundcover and also help fire spread across the landscape. Harvesting and site preparation methods proposed to shape the future conditions of these stands have been utilized successfully in the past by the Forest Service and many other land management practitioners. Herbicide application will be on a need basis and evaluated after timber harvest. If woody vegetation occupies the stand following logging operations herbicide will be used. If herbaceous vegetation becomes established treatment would consist of mechanical mowing/mulching. I believe the herbicides (Velpar, Hexazinone, and Glyphosate) will give the Forest Service a more diverse range of potential chemical options.

I selected alternative B (with modifications) because the no-action alternative A would not accomplish the goals and objectives established in the forest plan and would not meet the purpose and need for action. Under alternative A, fuel loading issues would continue to persist within close proximity of private property. The potential of wildfires posing a direct threat to life and property would remain a high concern. Pine stands would continue to exhibit diminished growth and groundcover conditions would deteriorate due to canopy closure. Stunted plantations would continue to trend downward and would not trend toward RCW foraging habitat. I selected alternative B over the no herbicide alternative (C) because the herbicides hexazinone, glyphosate, and triclopyr have been used frequently with great success in similar conditions across this forest. These herbicides work well to control competing vegetation which is the key to restoring longleaf pine and reducing fuel loading. Mitigation steps will be taken to limit adverse impacts on water, air, and soil quality. Herbicides will not be applied in times of high moisture, wind, and temperatures. Mechanical site preparation would expose the landscape to more potential for soil compaction and erosion whereas chemical application of herbicide would be far less impactful in regards to soil compaction.

The construction of three parallel parking spaces near the FNST will enhance the recreation experience by providing an additional launch point for hikers looking to explore the Bradwell Bay Wilderness and/or the analysis area.

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The significance of environmental impacts must be considered in terms of context and intensity. This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human and national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. In the case of a site-specific action, significance usually depends upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Intensity refers to the severity or degree of impact. (40 CFR 1508.27)

### CONTEXT

The Soldier Bay Analysis Area is located on the western portion of the Wakulla Ranger District. All compartments have common borders with private land and are situated just east of the Smith Creek Community. The forest has several user groups that pursue dispersed recreation opportunities within this area. There are several environmental groups that look to the forest as having pristine model longleaf pine ecosystems. There are also research organizations that utilize the National Forest for their studies. These groups operate over the whole forest but may or may not be present where the proposed actions would take place. All of the proposed actions would take place within the next 3 to 5 years.

### INTENSITY

The intensity of effects was considered in terms of the following:

1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial.** Consideration of the intensity of environmental effects is not biased by beneficial effects of the action.
2. **The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.** There will be no significant effects on public health and safety because the proposed actions will utilize known design standards or be applied according the product labels. (See EA page 66-67)
3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because the impacts of the proposed treatments would be limited to the land within the analysis area. It is unlikely that any affects would be broad enough to affect the landscape. (See EA pages 68-69 and 73-74)
4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known credible scientific controversy over the impacts of the proposed action. All of the proposed actions have been done before in similar ground conditions with satisfactory results. (See EA page 23-66)

5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The Agency has considerable experience with actions like the one proposed. The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. (See EA page 23-66)
6. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because all of the proposed actions have been utilized several times before.
7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** The cumulative impacts are not significant. The effect of the proposed actions are limited to the local area and there are no other effects that would be additive to the effects of the proposed action. Prescribed burning and adjacent thinning projects serve as the past and future activities identified in most resource area analysis. (See EA page 23-66)
8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed , or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.** The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because all the stands and roads to be treated by a proposed action have been surveyed by our Forest Archeologist (See EA page 53-54). The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources because any site discovered will be flagged to be avoided during the proposed operations. In addition all contracts required to carry out the proposed work would have Archeological protection clauses which would stop the work immediately if a new site is discovered. (See EA page 68)
9. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.** The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973. The Biological Assessment determined that implementation of the project is not likely to adversely affect RCW, indigo snake or frosted flatwoods salamander and would have no effect on other listed species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with that determination on March 16, 2016. (See BA and EA page 35-57)
10. **Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.** The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the 1999 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (See EA pages 1-3).

After considering the effects of the actions analyzed, in terms of context and intensity, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

## FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

The decision to implement Alternative B, it is consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's forestwide goals and objectives listed on pages 2-3 to 2-7. The project was designed in conformance with the Forest Plan's standards and guidelines for vegetation management, wildlife habitat improvement, heritage resources protection, wildland fire prevention, and road management.

Pursuant to Sect. 7 policies for interagency consultation under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, a Biological Assessment was prepared and received US Fish and Wildlife Service concurrence on 03/07/2016.

Pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act and other federal laws protecting cultural resources, a cultural resource survey was completed and concurrence was received from State Historic Preservation Office on October 8, 2015.

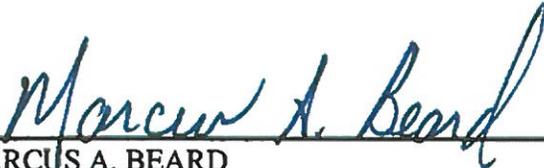
Clearcutting and planting longleaf pine seedlings has been determined to be the optimum method for regeneration of stands 18, and 21 of compartment 312; stand 1 of compartment 326; and stand 42 of compartment 328. Seed tree or shelterwood cuts would not adequately restock the stands with longleaf due to the lack of mature residual longleaf trees to serve as a seed source. The stands to be clearcut are slash pine stands that are stunted.

The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA) states that the Forest Service "shall insure that, prior to harvest, stands of trees throughout the National Forest System shall generally have reached the culmination of mean annual increment of growth (CMAI) (calculated on the basis of cubic measurement or other methods of calculation at the discretion of the Secretary)" (NFMA 1976). The clearcuts proposed under the Soldier Bay Analysis Area are exempt from conforming to CMAI standards based on the forestwide goals outlined in the Forest Plan to "Maintain or, where necessary restore ecosystem composition, structure, and function within the natural range of variability in all ecosystems, with emphasis on longleaf pine-wiregrass..." (USDA 1999b pg. 2-3). To accomplish the goals outlined, the Forest Plan has set a long term objective to "restore all off-site slash pine to appropriate native vegetation" (USDA 1999b pg. 2-5).

Based on the above Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and EA, I determined these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will not be prepared.

**CONTACT**

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Branden Tolver:  
btolver02@fs.fed.us or by phone (850) 926-3561 extension 6525.

  
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MARCUS A. BEARD  
District Ranger

  
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Date

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**References****National Forest Management Act.**

**USDA. 1999a.** Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Florida.

**USDA. 1999b.** Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for National Forests in Florida.

## Appendix A

Proposed Action, Alternative B – Estimated Treatment Acres by Stand

Comp	Stand	Treat. Acres	Treatment	Hexazinone	Triclopyr	Glyphosate	Plant Longleaf	Release
312	1	38	Thin	X				
312	5	17	Thin					
312	6	29	Thin					
312	7	55	Thin					
312	9	30	Thin		X	X		
312	10	15	Hardwood Removal		X	X		
312	11	18	Hardwood Removal		X	X		
312	15	24	Hardwood Removal		X	X		
312	18	41	Clearcut		X	X	X	X
312	18	59	Underplant		X	X	X	X
312	21	12	Clearcut		X		X	X
312	22	46	Thin		X	X		
312	23	57	Hardwood Removal		X	X		
312	24	18	Thin		X	X		
312	27	62	Thin					
326	1	24	Clearcut	X			X	X
326	2	12	Thin					
326	7	45	Hardwood Removal		X	X		
326	8	5	Thin / Hardwood Control	X				
326	9	25	Thin					
326	12	74	Thin/ Hardwood Control	X				
326	14	44	Hardwood Control	X				
326	15	9	Thin		X	X		
326	17	22	Thin		X	X		
326	18	47	Thin		X	X		
326	19	88	Thin		X	X		
326	23	19	Hardwood Control		X	X		
326	30	48	Thin		X	X		
328	1	30	Hardwood Control	X				

Comp	Stand	Treat. Acres	Treatment	Hexazinone	Triclopyr	Glyphosate	Plant Longleaf	Release
328	3	54	Hardwood Control	X				
328	4	69	Thin					
328	6	6	Thin		X	X		
328	9	150	Thin		X	X		
328	10	125	Thin					
328	12	63	Thin/ Hardwood Control	X				
328	13	44	Thin		X	X		
328	14	8	Thin		X	X		
328	15	17	Thin		X	X		
328	18	6	Thin					
328	23	44	Thin		X	X		
328	27	13	Thin		X	X		
328	28	20	Thin					
328	42	15	Clearcut		X	X	X	X
328	43	29	Thin		X	X		
328	45	28	Thin		X	X		
328	49	28	Thin		X	X		
328	50	16	Thin					
328	53	80	Thin		X	X		
328	65	10	Hardwood Control	X				
328	66	35	Hardwood Control	X				
328	67	43	Thin		X	X		
328	81	13	Thin		X	X		
328	86	33	Thin		X	X		
328	87	22	Thin					
328	99	80	Thin					
<b>Totals</b>		<b>2064</b>		<b>377</b>	<b>1149</b>	<b>1137</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>151</b>