



## Decision Notice

And

## Finding of No Significant Impact

For

# Southern Creek Ouachita River Project Area

## Polk County, Arkansas

**Responsible Agency:**  
US Forest Service  
Ouachita National Forest  
Mena and Oden Ranger District

**Responsible Official:**  
Tim Oosterhous, District Ranger  
1603 Highway 71 North  
Mena, AR 71953

**For Further Information Contact:**  
Jade Ryles  
479-394-2382

**September 2015**

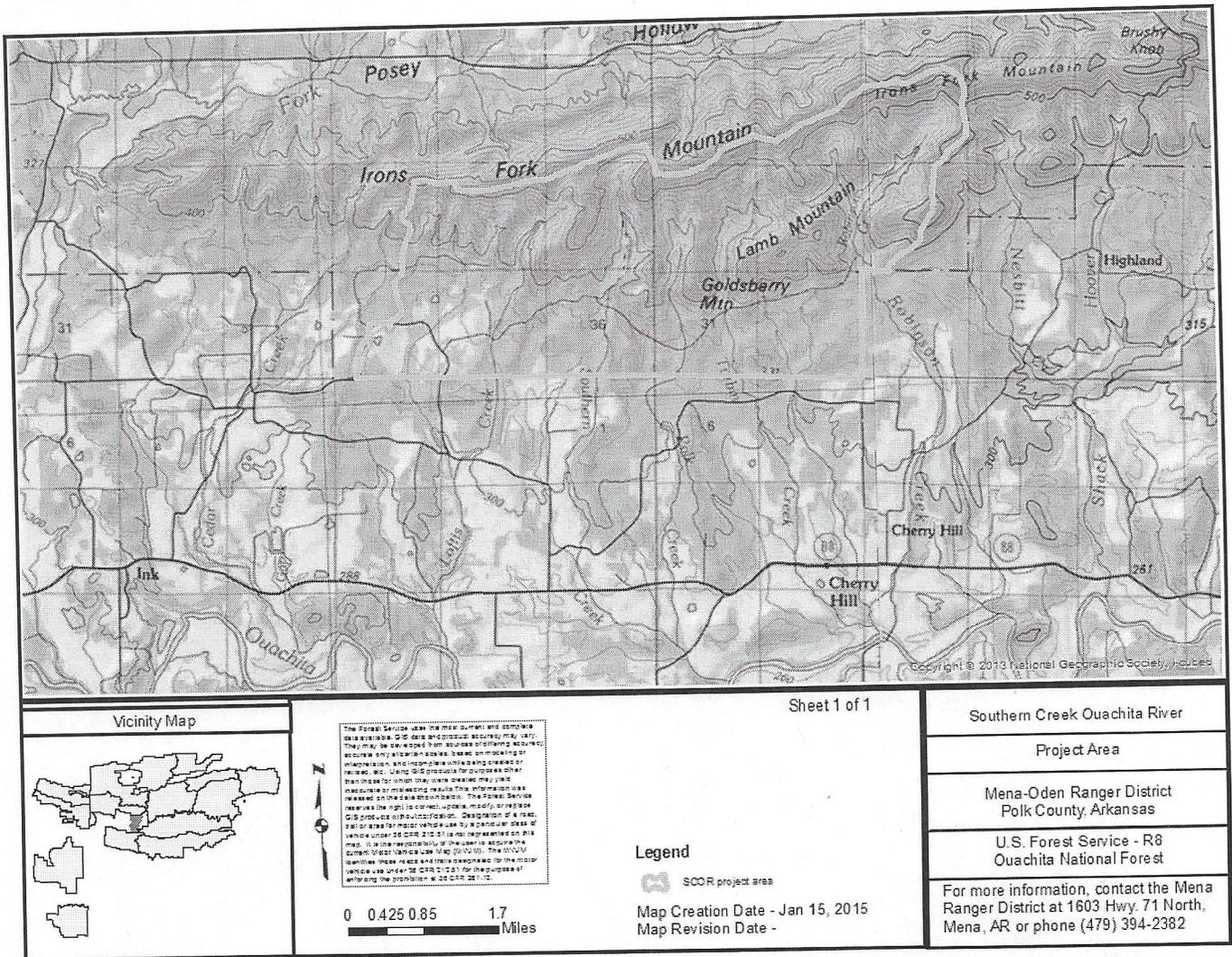
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## Background

The Southern Creek Ouachita River Project (SCOR) is located in. Township (T) 1 South (S), Range (R) 28 West (W), Sections 19-21 and 28-33; T1S, R29W, Sections 25-27 and 34-36; T2S, R28W, Sections 4-9, 16-20, and 29-32; T2S, R29W, Sections 1-3, 10-15, 22-27, and 34-36; T3S, R28W, Section 6; and T3S, R29W, Sections 1-3 and 10-12 in Polk County, Arkansas. Of the 6,636 acre project area, 5,460 acres are located on National Forest system lands. The SCOR is comprised of Compartments 852, 855, 856, 857, 859 and small portions of Compartments 860 and is approximately 10 miles east of Mena AR. The proposed action will occur in Management Areas (MA) 9, 14 and 17. The existing conditions in this watershed were compared to the ONF Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Revised Forest Plan, USDA Forest Service, 2005a) as directed by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requirements. Management opportunities were proposed and analyzed in order to move the watershed toward desired condition(s) as stated in the Revised Forest Plan.

**Figure 1: SCOR Project Area Vicinity Map**



## Proposed Action



The Mena-Oden Ranger District proposes to implement the following management activities\*:

- Commercial thinning – 736 acres
- Seed tree with reserves – 225 acres
- Site preparation by prescribed burn/herbicide or mechanical – 225 acres
- Hand plant shortleaf pine seedlings (if necessary) – 225 acres
- Stand improvement-midstory removal chainsaw/herbicide – 225 acres
- Stand improvement-regeneration release chainsaw/herbicide – 225 acres
- Stand improvement-regeneration precommercial thinning (PCT) chainsaw – 225 acres
- Fuel reduction prescribed burning – 5,460 acres
- Fire line construction – 3.4 miles
- Fire line maintenance – 5.3 miles
- Non-native invasive, exotic and nuisance plant species treatment – 5,460 acres
- Wildlife habitat improvement-midstory reduction – 160 acres
- Wildlife pond rehabilitation – 12 ponds
- Wildlife opening rehabilitation – 1 opening
- Nest box installation – 6 units
- Fish passage restoration – 4 crossings
- Stream restoration- ½ mile
- Woodland (Shortleaf Pine Oak and Oak) Restoration by Commercial Thinning, Midstory Reduction and/or Prescribed Burning – 877 acres
- Temporary road construction – 5 miles
- Seasonal OHV user designation change Rd 799 – 4.6 miles
- Road maintenance – 9 miles

\*All figures are approximate.

## Decision

Based on the analysis documented in the Southern Creek Ouachita River (SCOR) Environmental Assessment (EA), I have decided to implement the Proposed Action. My decision is based on a review of the environmental analysis, project record and comments received, which includes a thorough review of relevant scientific information and consideration of comments received.

## Reason for the Decision

The Proposed Action was chosen over the other alternatives because it best meets the identified purpose and need for this project (EA, page 3).

The Ouachita National Forest will restore the health and vigor of the SCOR area. Implementing these activities would provide for a diversity of plant and animal communities throughout the SCOR area, provide early seral habitat in a well-distributed grass/forb or shrub/seedling stage, reduce fuel accumulation, and produce a sustainable yield of wood products

The purpose of this project is to move the project area toward desired conditions described in and adopted by the Ouachita National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Revised Forest Plan), and to effort to meet objectives established by it.



## Need for the Action

- Current conditions in the SCOR area do not meet the desired conditions for the forest Management Areas (MA's) and the ecological systems that occur within.
- Past fire suppression activities have removed the natural role of fire from the landscape. This absence of fire has resulted in excessive fuel accumulations, increasing the risk of damage to resources in the event of wildfire.
- The absence of fire has also resulted in reduced open understories necessary for the growth of many native plant communities, wildlife foods, and the natural regeneration of pine and oak.
- Pine stands contain damaged, poorly formed and diseased trees. The trees are overcrowded or densely stocked, which reduces growth and crown development. These conditions result in stress and reduced vigor and health, thus increasing susceptibility to insects and disease.
- There is limited access to those stands in need of silvicultural treatment, resulting in the need for temporary and permanent road construction. Some existing roads are not useable by log trucks for hauling, creating the need for road re-construction.
- There is a lack of high quality forage and a lack of nesting habitat for species requiring early successional habitat within the project area.
- Standing water is not readily available throughout the SCOR area year-round and is needed for consumption by wildlife and as reproductive sites for native amphibian species.
- There is a lack of suitable natural cavities for nesting within the project area.
- Glades are being encroached by cedar trees and non-native plant species that have reduced light reaching the ground and led to an impoverished cover of herbaceous plants.
- There are known populations of exotic and invasive plant species throughout the project area.

## Public Involvement

A Project Announcement Letter or "scoping letter" was mailed to the interested public on October 20, 2014, requesting input on the actions proposed. The Southern Creek Ouachita River Project was first listed on the Ouachita National Forest's Schedule of Proposed Actions in January 2015. Southern Creek Ouachita River Project Draft EA was released for public comment on March 25, 2015.

## Issues Identified

No site-specific concerns regarding the use of herbicides were raised during scoping; however Forest policy requires analysis of alternatives to herbicide use. For this reason, the following issue will be analyzed in depth:

- **Issue 1:** Herbicide use may create a safety hazard to workers and forest visitors.  
*Method of measurement:* Hazard quotient values of herbicides

## Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

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 context to 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 such as the Southern Creek Ouachita River



project, significance normally depends upon the localized effects rather than in the world as a whole. Intensity refers to the severity or degree of impact. (40 CFR 1508.27)

## Context

The selected alternative is limited in geographic context (40 CFR 1508.27(a)). Only the forested compartments, located in rural Polk County, Arkansas, will be managed. The effects of the biophysical actions are bounded by the extent of the project area itself. Socially and economically, most of the effects are highly localized (Polk County, primarily).

## Intensity

The following discussion is organized around the ten significance criteria described in 40 CFR 1508.27 and have been considered in my evaluation of *intensity* for this project.

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered, and this action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment (EA, Chapter 3, Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences). The effects of this project are expected to be within thresholds that historically have not resulted in impacts that, based on experience planning and implementing similar projects, would be considered significant.
2. The degree to which public health and safety may be affected is minimal (EA, pp. 97-98).
3. The project will not adversely affect any unique characteristics of the geographic area (historic or cultural resource, wetlands, and floodplains, etc.). This finding is based on information gathered through records and site specific field inventories (Chapter 3, Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences).
4. The effects of the proposed actions on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the proposed action (Chapter 3, Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences).
5. The actions do not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks to the human environment (Chapter 3, Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences).
6. The actions in this decision will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because all of the proposed actions have been implemented many times previously on similar sites across the Ouachita National Forest. (Chapter 3, Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences).
7. The cumulative effects of the proposed actions have been analyzed with consideration of past and foreseeable future activities on adjacent public and private land, and no significant cumulative effects would result from implementation (Chapter 3, Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences). The effect of the selected actions are limited to the local area, and there are no other effects that would be additive to those effects.
8. The actions will avoid any sites listed on or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places; and will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic resources. This determination is based on site specific cultural resource surveys conducted on the analysis area,



preparation of a Cultural Resources Report, and consultation on the proposed project with the Arkansas State Historic Preservation Officer (EA, p.28). A letter of concurrence was issued by the Arkansas State Historic Preservation Officer on May 14, 2015.

9. The actions are not likely to adversely affect endangered or threatened species or critical habitat for such species established pursuant to the Endangered Species Act (EA, pp. 51 -93 and Biological Evaluation). A Biological Evaluation was completed and submitted to the US Fish and Wildlife Service for informal consultation in March 2015. The Service issued a letter of concurrence with this determination on September 11, 2015.
10. None of the actions will violate federal, state, or local laws imposed for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. All actions are consistent with the Forest Plan. The project will be monitored to ensure that Plan requirements are implemented. If project implementation results in effects greater than anticipated, because of unforeseen site factors or events, appropriate corrective measures will be considered and implemented, as appropriate. (EA, Chapter 3).

After considering the effects of the selected alternative in terms of context and intensity, I have determined that the associated 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**

I have determined that actions included in this decision are consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Ouachita National Forest because the Selected Alternative (Proposed Action) has been planned and will be implemented in accordance with all applicable design criteria of the Revised Forest Plan.

### **Administrative Review and Objection Process**

This decision is not subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218.

### **Implementation Date**

This decision may be implemented any time following the date of signature.

### **Contact**

For further information on this decision, contact Jade Ryles, 1603 Hwy 71, Mena, AR 71953; phone (479)-394-2382; email [cjryles@fs.fed.us](mailto:cjryles@fs.fed.us).

### **Responsible Official**

**Tim Oosterhous**  
District Ranger

**DATE**