

DECISION MEMO

Southern Pine Beetle Restoration Chainsaw Tree Cutting, Prescribed Burning, and Planting Upper Warwoman & Lower Stekoa Hydrologic Units in Fiscal Years 2004-2006

USDA Forest Service – Chattahoochee–Oconee National Forests - Tallulah Ranger District - Rabun County, Georgia

1. DECISION & PURPOSE AND NEED FOR PROJECT

I have decided to approve the proposal to treat four stands using combinations of tree cutting, prescribed burning, and supplemental planting. The four stands are located in the Upper Warwoman and Lower Stekoa Creek hydrologic units (fifth-order drainages), and include a total of approximately 74 treatment acres. Specific locations along with the treatments are described below and the locations are shown on the attached map. The treatments will likely be completed in the next year, however some treatments may occur in FY 2006.

Existing conditions within these forest communities include 10-15 year-old trees that have had almost 100% mortality of pine trees due to southern pine beetle infestations during the 1999-2002 epidemic. Work under this decision will cut down selected trees to provide a fuel bed for a prescribed burn. This will be followed by a widely spaced planting of shortleaf pine seedlings, with an objective of regenerating a forest community of pines, oaks, hickories, and other native hardwood species (Concern of Georgia Forest Watch (GFW), Chattooga Conservancy (CC), and Butler, 5/11/04).

This project is designed to help move the Forest toward Goals 3, 8 and 40 in the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (Forest Plan).

Area #	Project Location	Acres (est.)	Treatment Description	Management Prescription	Goals and Objectives of Treatment
R7	Hog Mountain	20	Cut down selected trees across stand; prescribe burn; plant shortleaf pine on a 12-foot spacing	9.A.3 – Watershed Restoration Areas: <i>“...showcase restored and resilient watersheds where proper multiple use management practices are applied.”</i>	Restore a disturbance-dependent community of shortleaf pine (Goal 3, Objective 3.1 in the Forest Plan) along with a variety of native hardwoods, including oaks and hickories (GFW ,CC, and Butler concern, 5/11/04). These treatments will also contribute to restoration of native tree species, namely shortleaf pine, whose role in forest ecosystems has been reduced by insects and disease along with fire exclusion and forest succession (Goal 8 in the Forest Plan). By planting at a wide spacing, the vulnerability to native pests like the southern pine beetle will be reduced (GFW and Butler concern, 5/11/04) (Goal 40 in the Forest Plan).
R8	John Rowland Branch Road	25	Same as above.		
R9	Eastman Mountain	7	Same as above.		
R16	Finney Creek	22	Prescribed Burned in 2004 under another decision; spot plant with shortleaf pine on a 12-foot spacing		

Three of these four forest communities were dominated by loblolly pine before being infested with southern pine beetle and eventually being killed. Ecosystem classification modeling was used to predict the range of species that have a natural potential to occur on these sites. The actions covered by this decision are designed to regenerate species within this range. The regenerated stands will have a wide spacing of native shortleaf pine, and the stand will include other native species including chestnut, southern red, scarlet, post, white, and black oaks as well as hickory, yellow poplar, blackgum, flowering dogwood and sourwood (GFW, CC, and Butler concern, 5/11/04). These stands will be managed as shortleaf pine stands, but with other species composing up to 30% of the trees in the overstory (tallest trees in the forest) as well as a high diversity of species in the midstory and understory of the stand (GFW and CC concern, 5/11/04).

The four stands are within Management Prescription (Prescription) 9.A.3, *Watershed Restoration Areas*. The long-term goal in this prescription is to improve conditions to showcase restored and resilient watersheds where proper multiple use management practices are applied (Forest Plan, page 3-153). The restoration work, as specified above, will meet this emphasis.

Small narrow sections of the project areas are within riparian corridors, Prescription 11. Restoration work within the riparian corridor of perennial and intermittent watercourses will be limited to upland areas in order to favor the recovery of the native shortleaf pine (Forest Plan, page 3-177-178, including Standard 11-001). Riparian areas will not be treated with selective tree cutting, and only low intensity prescribed burning will be conducted, allowed to go out near streams. Control lines, if needed, will be constructed by hand within the riparian area of the corridors. Water bars will be installed on all control lines within riparian corridors where the slope is over 3% and spaced as directed in *Georgia's Best Management Practices for Forestry* (GA BMP's), page 37.



Loblolly Pine Stand with almost 100% Mortality

Other important mitigation measures include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Bare soil created by control lines for prescribed burning will be revegetated within 30 days (Forest Plan, page 2-22, FW-067).
- All or a minimum of 20 square feet per acre of canopy or midstory trees will be left in ephemeral stream corridors, when present (Forest Plan, page 2-23, FW-078).
- Hand-built fire control lines will be used within the ephemeral corridor (Forest Plan, page 2-24, FW-084)
- The minimum reforestation standard (200 trees per acre by the third year) will be met, including planted shortleaf pine seedlings combined with desirable species naturally regenerating within the areas (Forest Plan, page 2-26, FW-089), with an emphasis on native hardwoods, especially oaks and hickories.

- All of the areas are in Scenic Class 2 under the Scenery Management System. The landscape character in Prescription 9.A.3 is *Naturally Appearing*. Mitigation will include:
 - Reserving flowering and other visually attractive trees and shrubs, where possible, and along the John Rowland Branch Road (Area R8) (Forest Plan, page 2-30, FW-110);
 - Slash will be lopped or burned to lie within an average of two feet of the ground within 100 feet of the John Rowland Branch Road (Area R8) (Forest Plan, page 2-29, FW-105);
 - Any flagging will be removed promptly within 100 feet of the John Rowland Branch Road (Area R8). Biodegradable flagging will be used.
- Prescribed burning will follow all applicable standards in the Forest Plan, including but not limited to:
 - A prescribed burning plan will be completed by a qualified incident commander and approved by the District Ranger before conducting any of the prescribed burns in this project.
 - Control lines will be located to minimize mineral soil exposure (FW-195);
 - Firelines will only be located in riparian corridors if the purpose is to tie into them as a fire barrier (FW-196), and then only with hand-constructed lines.
 - Water diversions will be installed on control lines during their construction (FW-205) to minimize soil erosion and the possibility of sediment reaching watercourses.
- A feathered edge will be created along the outside of these treated areas throughout the regeneration process (FW-007) (GFW concern, 5/11/04).
- Brush, fallen stems, and berms will be used in combination to deter off-road vehicle use of fire control lines (GFW concern, 5/11/04).

I have determined that this action falls under Category 6 of the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Section 31.2, which includes a category of actions which do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment. Specifically, this category includes timber stand improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides and do not require more than one mile of road construction. There is no road construction included in this decision.

I have also determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the project to have significant effects. Therefore, neither an environmental impact statement nor an environmental assessment will need to be prepared (GFW concern, 5/11/04). Specifically:

- ❑ This project will not take place on steep slopes or highly erosive soils. The "Soil Survey of Rabun and Towns Counties, Georgia" (available for review at the Tallulah District office) shows that soils in these areas have a moderate erosion hazard and slight to moderate equipment limitations based on the slope and soil series present (project file.) Moderate erosion hazard means that "some attention must be given to controlling erosion." Using chainsaws (as opposed to heavy equipment) (GFW concern, 5/11/04) and employing mitigation measures as described above (water diversions on control lines, prompt revegetation) as planned will reduce the impacts to negligible levels (SABP concern, 5/11/04).
- ❑ The action will not affect any federally Endangered or Threatened species, nor impact any Forest Sensitive species (SABP concern, 5/11/04). It will not result in a trend toward federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, or a loss of viability on the Forest. Zone Wildlife Biologist Andy Gaston has reviewed Forest Service files and no PETS (Proposed, Endangered,

Threatened, or Sensitive) species were identified that may be impacted by the restoration actions. No known locations of PETS species were identified in Forest Service files or in the Georgia Natural Heritage Program database for the project locations (see project file.)

- ❑ No jurisdictional wetlands (as defined in the Forest Service Manual 2527.05--8), floodplains, or municipal watersheds will be affected by this project.
- ❑ No congressionally designated area, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas will be affected by this project. The project is not within a research natural area.
- ❑ The actions are not within a currently inventoried roadless area (SABP concern, 5/11/04).
- ❑ No known historic properties eligible for or listed in the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by this project (project file).
- ❑ The project takes place in the Warwoman and Stekoa Creek watersheds, both listed as impaired due to excessive sedimentation by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for the State of Georgia (303(d) list). The methods of treatment in this decision will not contribute to increased sediment loads within this watershed. This is due to minimal exposure of mineral soil (fire lines) and no road construction. Therefore, this circumstance is not considered extraordinary within the overall context of this project.
- ❑ These as well as other proposed restoration and thinning projects are not connected to one another in any environmentally binding way. In other words, one thinning or restoration project does not trigger or depend on one another. Therefore, these restoration projects are considered similar (same methods, some have same timing and geography) but not connected in any way (GFW concern, 5/11/04). In addition, these actions are considered to not have significant effects, individually or cumulatively (see above)(SABP concern, 5/11/04).
- ❑ None of these four stands display any characteristics meeting the criteria for old growth as described in “*Guidance for Conserving and Restoring Old Growth Forest Communities on National Forests in the Southern Region,*” (available for review at the Tallulah Ranger District office) and by following guidance laid out in the Forest Plan (pages 2-16 to 2-18)(SABP concern, 5/11/04).
- ❑ These actions will not change (open, close, construct, reconstruct, or obliterate) any road conditions within or nearby the areas to be treated, therefore no road analysis is necessary (SABP concern, 5/11/04).

2. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Scoping both internally and externally raised no concerns that were determined to be extraordinary circumstances.

A letter detailing this project was sent out to 102 individuals, agencies and public organizations in April of 2004 (see project file, Tallulah Ranger District.) Several comments were received. One comment was supportive (Myers, 4/22/2004) while three others raised some concerns (Gatins, Georgia Forest Watch, 5/11/2004; Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project (SABP), 5/11/2004; Chattooga Conservancy, 5/10/2004). My staff and I have modified some of the treatments in response to these concerns in ways that do not substantially alter the initial proposal. We have also answered questions posed within these comment letters. Both the modifications and answers are noted within this document with citations to the person or organization that brought up the concern.

In addition, we responded to questions in the field with Georgia Forest Watch representative Joe Gatins on May 11, 2004.

3. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

This project is consistent with the Forest Plan. The actions in this project fully comply with the Forest-wide standards (Forest Plan, 2-3 through 2-72) as well as the Prescription 9.A.3 and 11 standards (Forest Plan, pages 3-153 to 3-156 and 3-171 to 3-182).

Areas will be burned only after completion and approval of a site specific burn plan. Burns will only be ignited if all parameters of the plan are within the range approved. Parameters include, but are not limited to: smoke plume trajectory, identification of smoke sensitive areas, mixing heights and transport winds (for dispersal of smoke), relative humidity, wind speed, and fuel moisture content. These precautions ensure that these burns will meet or exceed air quality standards in the Forest Plan (page 2-72), and therefore will comply with the Clean Air Act (CAA).

This decision will not disproportionately affect minority and/or low-income communities. There are no known high or adverse environmental effects associated with the actions in this decision. The processing of this decision along with implementation of the actions in this decision in the future has not and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin.

This project will comply with the Recreational Fisheries Executive Order by enhancing riparian corridors and producing no additional sediment within the two watersheds involved.

As discussed above, state-approved BMP's will be met and this project will comply with the Clean Water Act.

This project complies with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b):

- Restoration actions are appropriate in these forest communities to meet the multiple-use goals established in the Forest Plan. (see pages 1-2 for discussion)
- Assures that these four areas can be adequately restocked to levels stated in the Forest Plan, page 2-26 (Standard FW-089) within five years (see page 2 for discussion).
- Actions have not been chosen to maximize dollar return or produce the greatest output of timber, although these factors were taken into consideration. (see page 1)
- Actions have been chosen after considering the potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands. (pages 1-2)
- The actions will enhance and improve the productivity of the sites and ensure conservation of soil and water resources. (pages 1-5)
- The projects provide the desired effects on all affected resource yields, including water quality (SABP concern, 5/11/04).

- The actions are practical in terms of the site preparation and planting requirements and costs.

4. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision will be implemented in Fiscal Years 2004-2005, with some work possibly taking place in Fiscal Year 2006.

5. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8(a)(4.)

6. CONTACT PERSON

For further information concerning this decision or the appeal process contact Steve Cole by phone, letter, e-mail, or in person. The address of the Tallulah Ranger District office is 809 Highway 441 South, Clayton, GA 30525, and the phone number is (706) 782-3320. Contact Steve by e-mail at sncole@fs.fed.us.

7. SIGNATURE AND DATE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

/s/ David W. Jensen

September 1, 2004

DAVID W. JENSEN

DATE

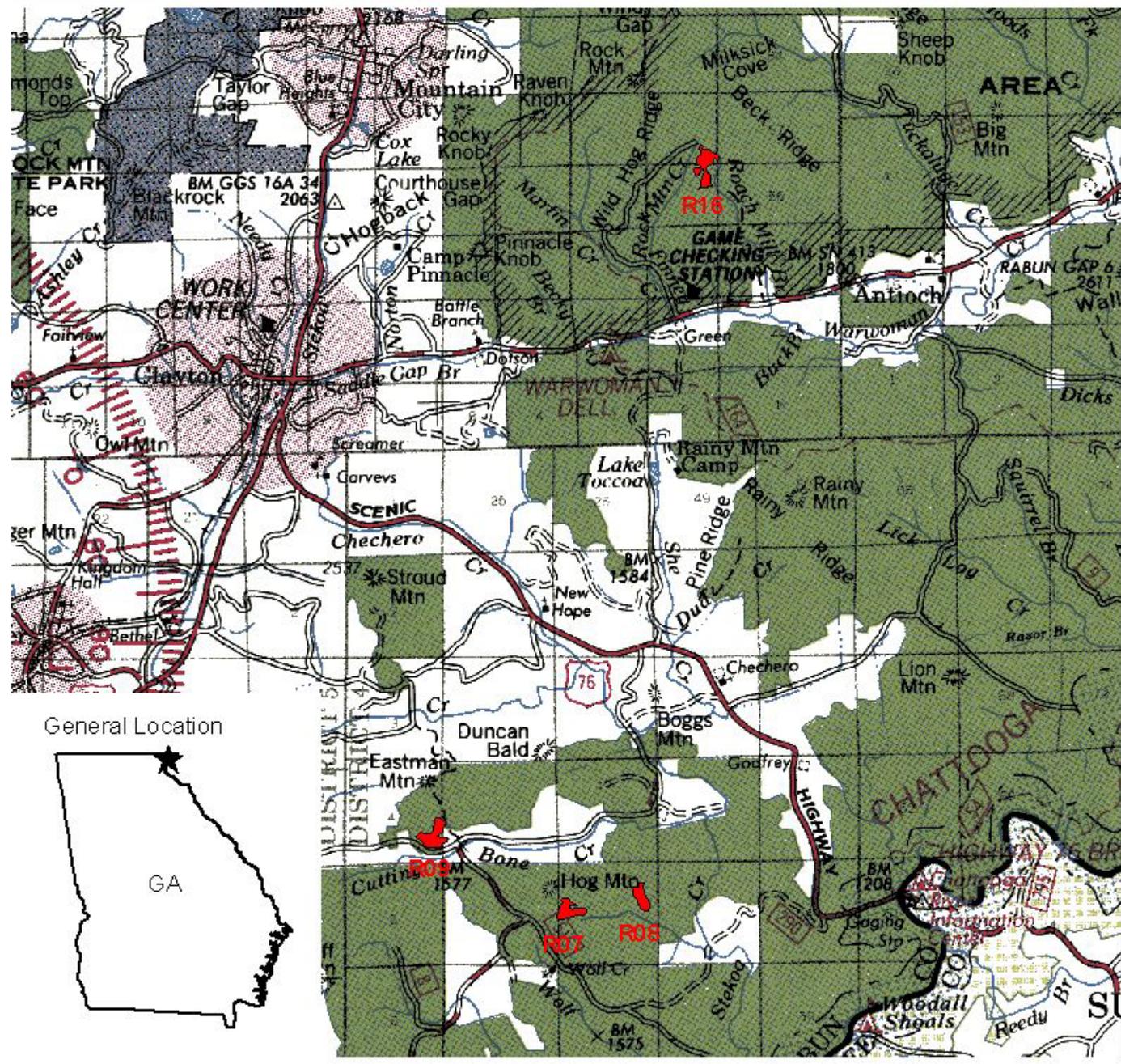
District Ranger

Chattahoochee-Oconee NF
GEOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SYSTEM

Location Map SPB Restoration Areas

Upper Warwoman and
Lower Stekoa Units

Tallulah Ranger District
Chattahoochee NF



General Location

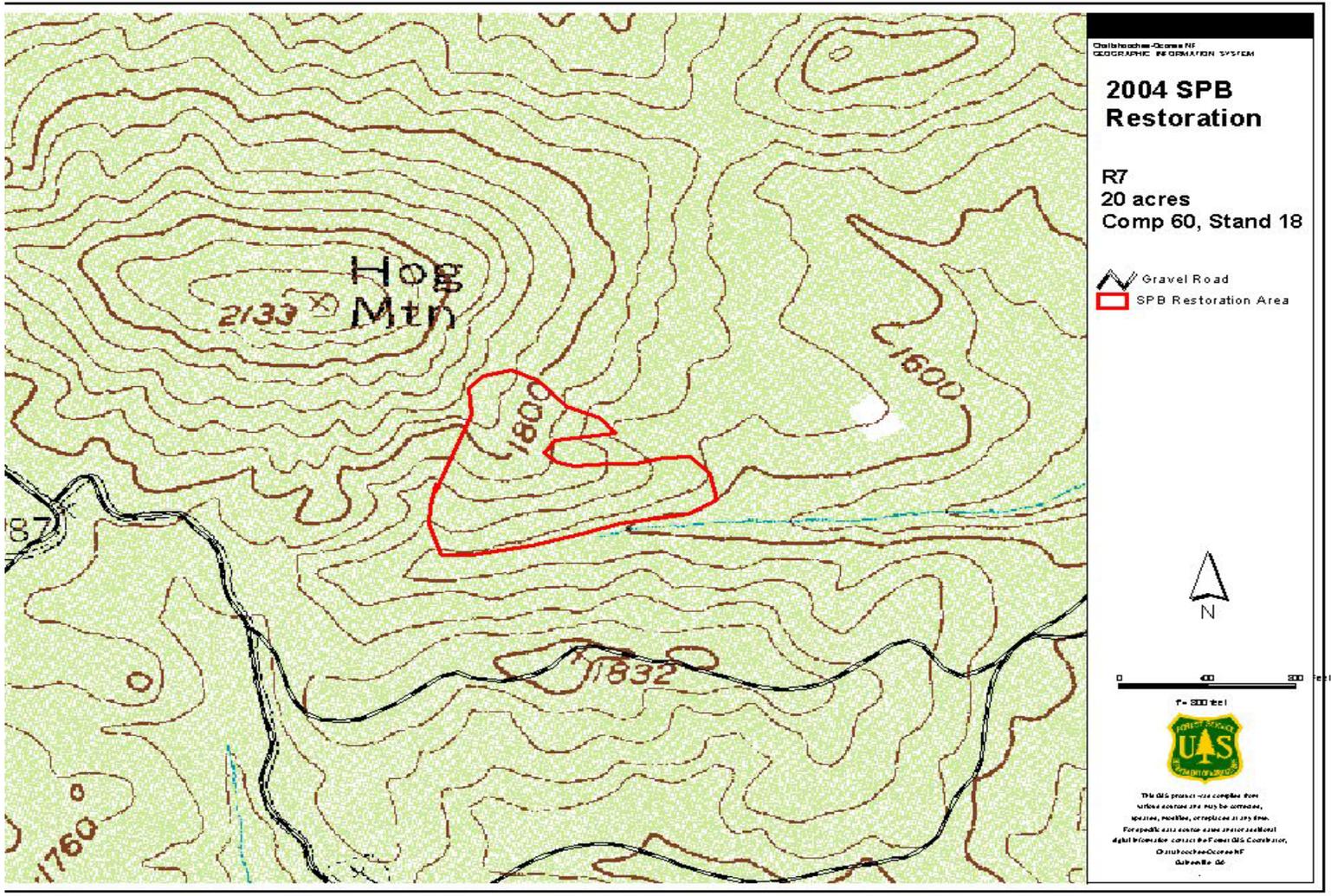


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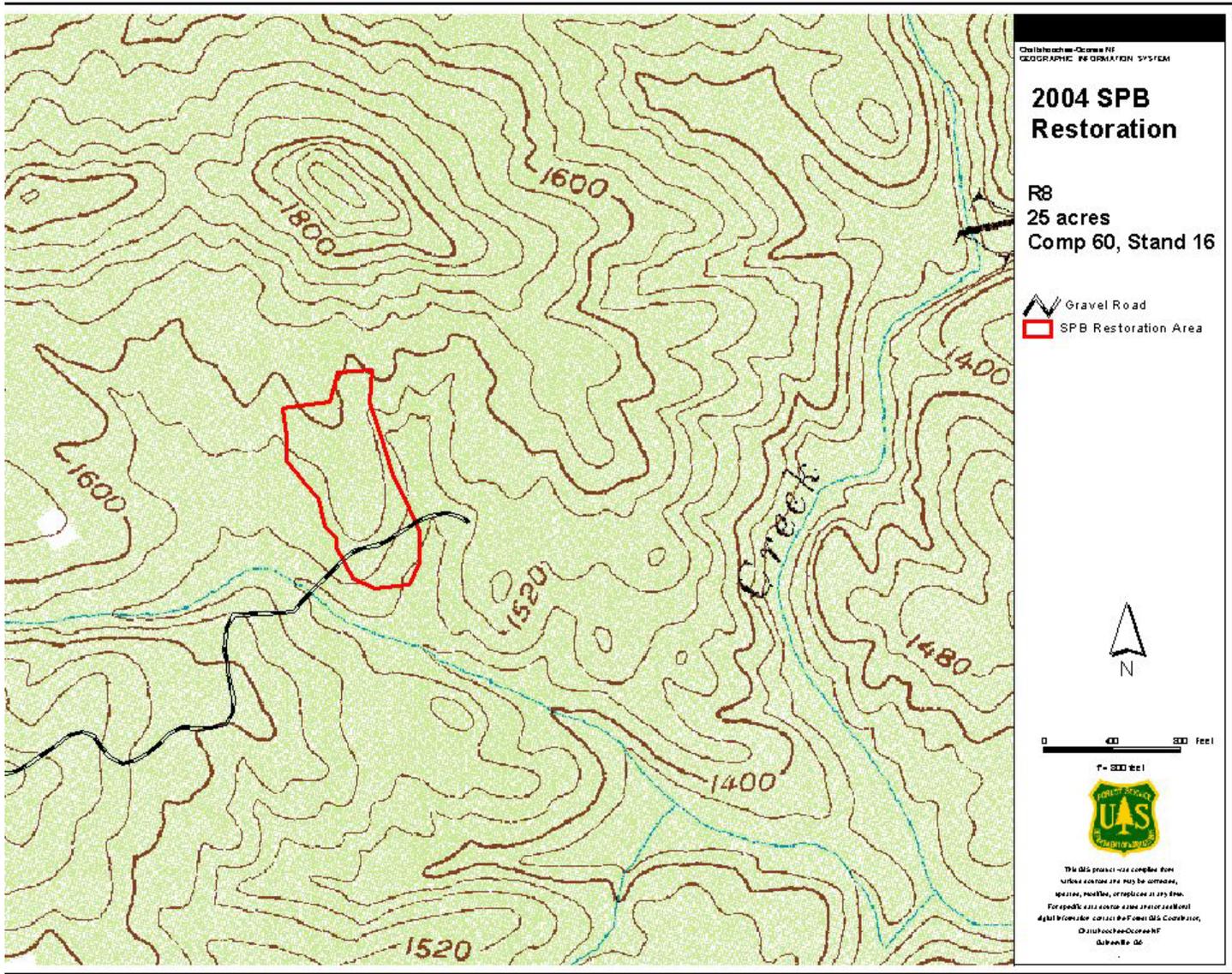
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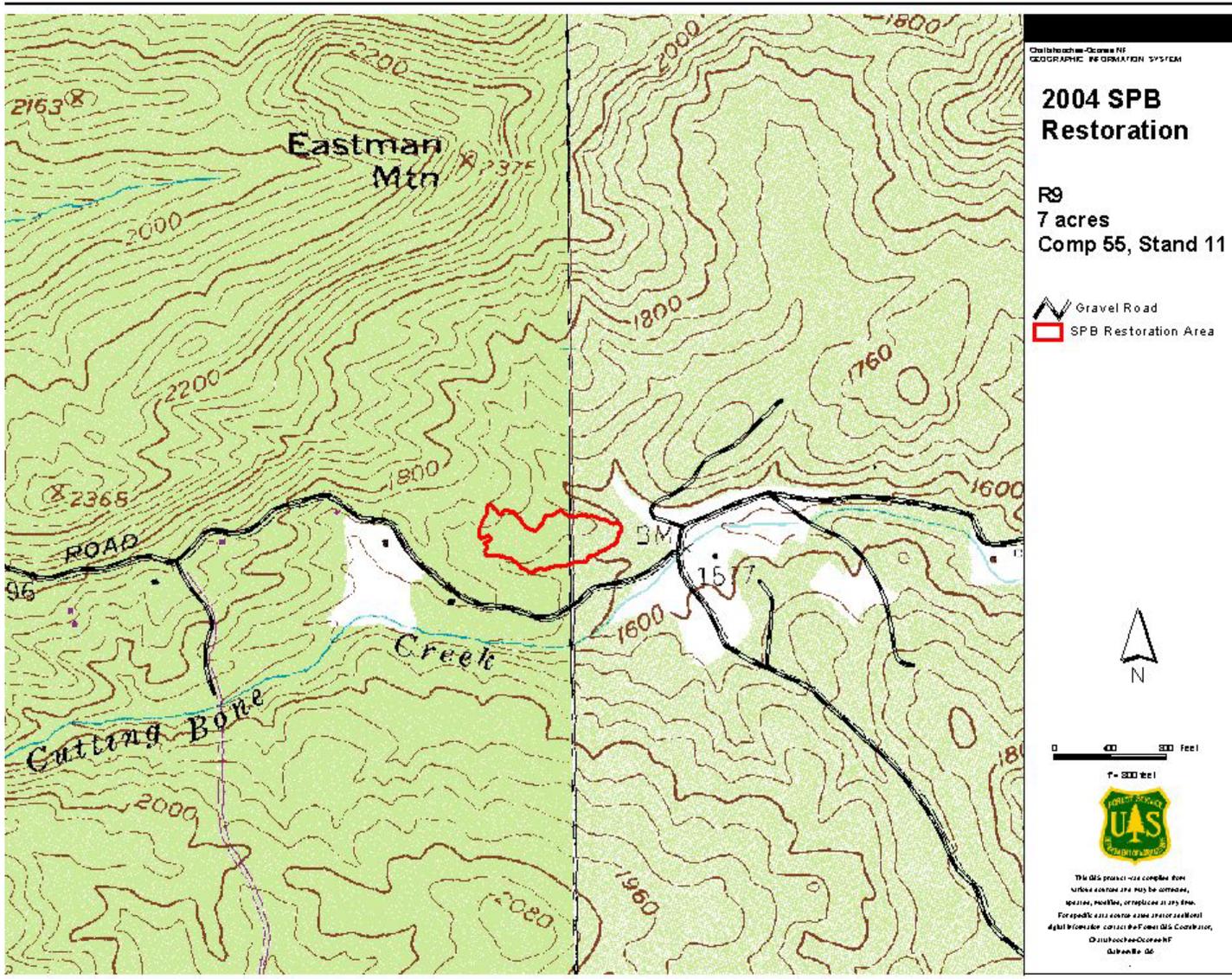
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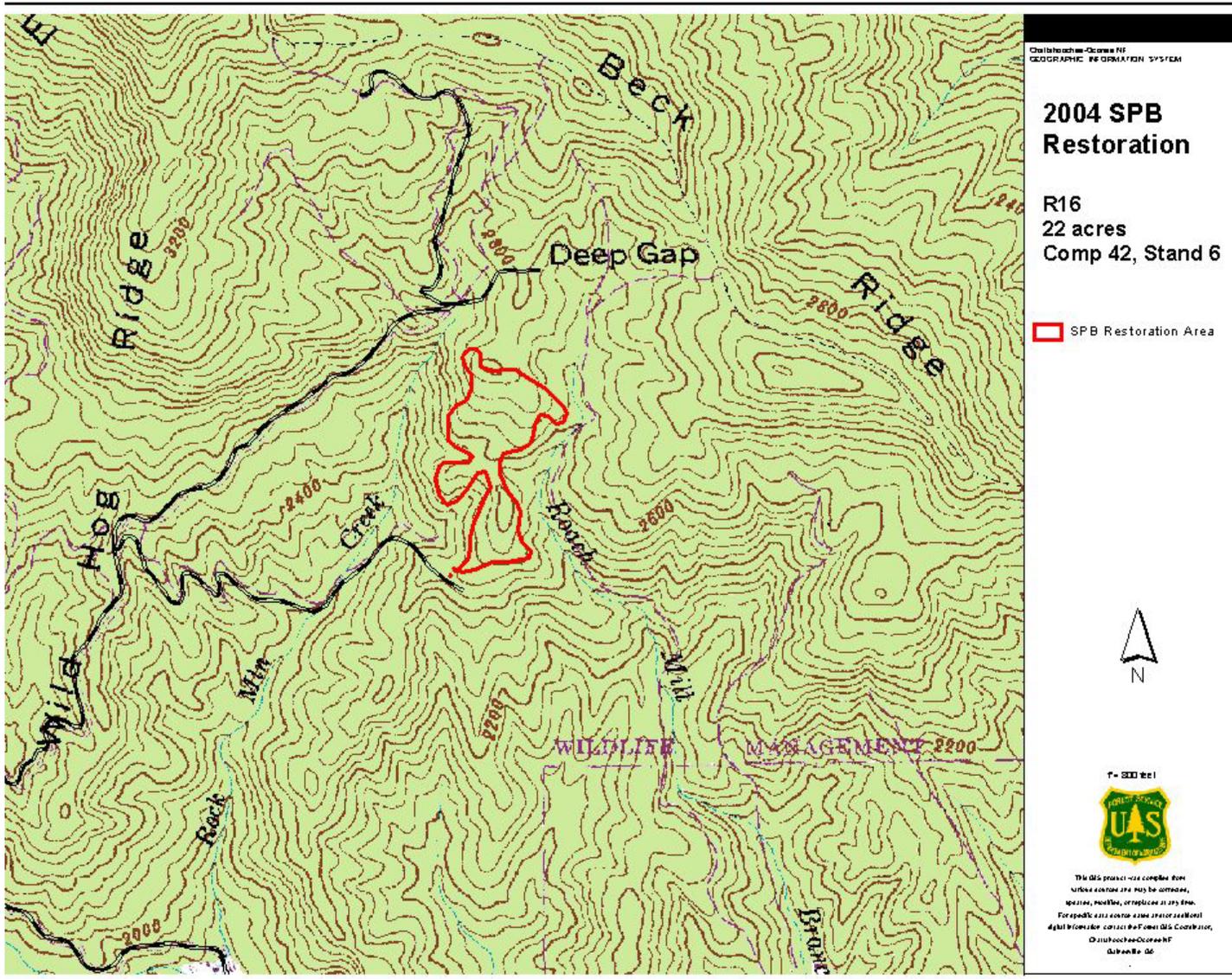
Attachment – Map – SPB Restoration - 1



Attachment – Map – SPB Restoration - 2



Attachment – Map – SPB Restoration - 3



Attachment – Map – SPB Restoration - 4