

Decision Memo

Chestnut Mountain Project for The Restoration and Maintenance of Early Successional Habitats on the Tallulah Ranger District

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

1. DECISION AND PURPOSE AND NEED

I have decided to approve the restoration and maintenance of early successional habitats for a suite of wildlife species. A need has been identified within this area of the forest to meet Goals 1, 2, and 13 of the 2004 Forest Plan.

The Chestnut Mountain project area contains approximately 786 acres and is located approximately 10 miles northwest of Clayton in the former Coleman River Wildlife Management Area in Rabun County (maps attached).

The method used to achieve this forest goal will be prescribed burning during the dormant season, November thru early April for the years 2004 through 2014. The project sites are located in Management Area (MA) 16 (1985 Forest Plan) and Management Prescription 8.A.2 (2004 Forest Plan). Direction in the 1985 Forest Plan guides us to enhance and create wildlife habitat by providing cover, succulent browse and soft mast in well-distributed units (pages 4-17 and 4-108). In addition, Goal 13 (2004 Forest Plan) states that the Forest will provide breeding, wintering, and migration staging and stopover habitat for migratory birds in ways that contribute to their long-term conservation.

Previous prescribed fires conducted in this area have created some of the only early successional habitat on the Chattahoochee National Forest at a high elevation appropriate for a suite of species including golden-winged warbler, yellow-bellied sapsucker, and ruffed grouse. Conducting this prescribed burn will maintain and restore open oak woodland habitat favored by these species. This decision will be reviewed before scheduling each prescribed burn following Section 18 in the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15.

Burning will take place approximately once every 4-5 years during the dormant season (over a 10 year period) (Concern of ForestWatch 8/12/03).

Pre and post burn monitoring will be conducted. Monitoring will include an evaluation to determine if objectives were met and if follow-up action is needed. Monitoring will be conducted by the Forest Service wildlife biologist and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources non-game biologist to determine habitat conditions and the presence or absence of target wildlife species (Concern of ForestWatch 8/12/03).

Bird point surveys will be conducted each year to determine the presence of Golden-winged warbler and other neo-tropical migrant birds within this project area.

Post project monitoring will also include estimates of forest floor litter remaining and understory vegetation consumed to determine if project goals for habitat improvement are

met. This project will be conducted with the cooperation and assistance of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

2. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Internal scoping began for this project in December of 2002. Non-game wildlife biologists with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources were contacted concerning this project in November 2002. Two on-site surveys of the project area were completed by Forest Service and Department of Natural Resources biologists for project planning purposes.

Initial public scoping began in July of 2003. A letter detailing this project was sent out to 92 individuals, agencies and public organizations in July of 2003 (see project file, Tallulah Ranger District.) Four responses were received. Responses to concerns have been noted in this decision by altering methods, mitigation, or providing more explanation.

3. REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

I have determined that this action falls within Category #6 (“Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.”) of Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Section 31.2 for categorical exclusions. These actions have been determined to have no significant effect on the quality of the human environment, either individually or cumulatively, and are therefore categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA).

FINDING OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

Based on the results of internal and external scoping, I have determined that no extraordinary circumstances exist that could cause the actions involved with prescribed burning to have significant effects.

4. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

As required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976, I have determined that this action is consistent with both the 1985 and 2004 Forest Plans. It adheres to applicable standards, guidelines, and monitoring requirements in these Forest Plans, which includes the soil and water protection measures of the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Appalachian Mountains.

This project complies with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b) by following the Forest-wide standards as mentioned above. Specifically:

- This prescribed burn is best suited to the multiple-use goals established for this area. This involved an analysis of impacts in relation to those expected by both of the Forest Plans. Refer to the earlier discussions of the project description, mitigation measures (Project File), and the determination that no extraordinary circumstances exist.
- This action was chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees, adjacent stands, and T&E species.

- This project will avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure the conservation of soil and water resources.
- This prescribed burn will provide the desired effects on fuel loadings, water, wildlife, fish, tree regeneration, forage, recreation, visual quality, and other resources.

5. IMPLEMENTATION

This project may be implemented immediately. Dormant season burning can be implemented between November and April.

6. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

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

7. CONTACT PERSON

For further information concerning this decision contact Andy Gaston 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 Andy by e-mail at avgaston@fs.fed.us

8. SIGNATURE AND DATE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

/s/ David W. Jensen
David W. Jensen
District Ranger

February 2, 2004
Date