



File Code: 1950

Date: April 15, 2004

Dear Forest User:

The Hitchiti Experimental Forest is cooperatively managed by the Southern Research Station, Georgia Forestry Commission and the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. Part of its mission is as a demonstration forest and to facilitate education transfer to resource managers, students and also the public in general. The Chattahoochee-Oconee Forest Plan identifies the Hitchiti as Management Area 3B (Experimental Forest). However, since it is located with the Red-cockaded Woodpecker (*Picoides borealis* (RCW)) Sub-Habitat Management Area it has similar RCW management goals and objectives as Management Area 8.D.1

The Chattahoochee-Oconee Forest Plan and the RCW Recovery Plan (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, 2003) specify the desired future habitat conditions relating to nesting and feeding required by this federally protected endangered species. At present there are 26 nesting sites located on the forest in southern Jasper and Jones Counties (including the Hitchiti Experimental Forest). Of the 26 cluster sites 15 are active areas and 11 are inactive cluster sites.

Two of the currently active cluster sites are composed of heavily overstocked mature loblolly pine stands surrounded by older stands that have deteriorated with heavy advance regeneration and only scattered overstory trees remaining. These deteriorated stands have already been precommercially thinned or received a midstory treatment. The remaining overstocked loblolly pine stands are roughly 70 acres in size and contain 100 to 160 square feet of basal area. Desirable RCW stocking levels would range from 40 to 70 square feet of basal area. Each currently overstocked block/stands contains 3-5 active nests and 20 inactive nest trees. Two of the active nest trees were recently lost to Southern Pine Beetle and Black turpentine Beetle activity. Competitive stress related to overstocked stand conditions predisposes trees to mortality from a variety factors.

The Oconee Ranger District is proposing two Commercial Thinning Projects (approximately 70 acres each) in the Hitchiti Experimental Forest.

Compartment 1 – RCW Commercial Thin to 60 BA on 69 acres (see map)

Compartment 001; Stands 003 and 050 (approximately 76 acres). Imbedded within stand 003 are the SES fire study plots (stands 57,58,59 and 61). The long-term fire study plots (stands) have been excluded from the sale. On approximately 69 acres a combined high/low thinning to 60 square feet of residual basal area is proposed for RCW habitat improvement. Thinning from above will focus on trees not expected to live another 5 years (lightning strikes, SPB, littleleaf, and other insect and disease problems). Thinning from below will remove overstocked trees



focusing on suppressed and intermediate sized trees. Riparian and equipment limitation zones along with other Forest Plan standards and guidelines will be followed.

Compartment 2 – RCW Commercial Thin to 60 BA on 68 acres (see map)

Compartment 002; Stands 056 and 057 (approximately 77 acres). Imbedded within each stand is an existing powerline (approximately 8 acres). On approximately 68 acres a combined high/low thinning to 60 square feet of residual basal area is proposed for RCW habitat improvement. Thinning from above will focus on trees not expected to live another 5 years (lightning strikes, SPB, littleleaf, and other insect and disease problems). Thinning from below will remove overstocked trees focusing on suppressed and intermediate sized trees. Riparian and equipment limitation zones along with other Forest Plan standards and guidelines will be followed.

Both sites are proposed for a low thinning to a residual BA of 60 sq. ft./acre for RCW habitat improvement. Each sale block contains approximately 3-5 active cavities and roughly 20 inactive cavity trees. Preliminary post sale treatments would include prescribed burning of activity fuels (plus any additional firelines), RCW artificial cavity insert installation plus out-year mtc. and monitoring, and out-year midstory control.

Both projects will utilize existing system roads. Approximately a quarter to a half mile of old temporary road locations will need to be re-opened for each project. All temporary road locations and landings will be seeded and closed upon completion of the project. Post sale activities will include artificial cavities, prescribed burning and future midstory control (using brush saws).

A field tour of the sites was held on February 18th, 2004. Cooperating Agencies, individuals, and environmental organizations that have expressed previous interest in these types of activities were invited to attend the prescoping meeting. The project proposals were refined to incorporate the knowledge and recommendations received from our stakeholders.

As required by the National Environmental Policy Act, I am seeking comments for each of the projects. I anticipate a decision memo will be prepared for each project. If you would like to comment on either project, or you would like additional information about these projects, please contact the Oconee Ranger District. Comments must be postmarked or received by **May 15, 2004**. Your comments need to be as specific as possible and include the following information:

1. Name, address, and (if possible) telephone number;
2. Title of the project (Compartment 1 RCW Commercial Thin or Compartment 2 Commercial Thin)
3. Specific facts or comments along with supporting reasons that I should consider in reaching a final decision on this proposal.

Your comments can be sent to the address on the letterhead. If you have any questions regarding this project please contact Tim Walker or myself at the District Office between 8:00 am and 4:00 pm Monday through Friday, 706-485-7110.

Sincerely,

/s/ William B. Nightingale
WILLIAM B. NIGHTINGALE
District Ranger

Enclosures