

DECISION MEMO

COOPERS CREEK EARLY SUCCESSIONAL HABITAT ENHANCEMENT PROJECT

USDA Forest Service – Chattahoochee–Oconee National Forests - Brasstown and Toccoa Ranger Districts –
Union County, Georgia

1. DECISION and PURPOSE AND NEED

We have decided to approve selected management actions that meet Forest Plan Goals 2 and 3 by enhancing habitat conditions for species that utilize early successional habitat. The work will occur along 5 roads and associated wildlife openings located on the Coopers Creek Wildlife Management Area, approximately ten miles south of Blairsville (see map).

The purpose of the project is to enhance habitat conditions for early successional species, including high-elevation early successional species such as the golden-winged warbler.

The revised Forest Plan has a number of forest-wide goals and objectives related to terrestrial wildlife habitat. A need was identified within the Coopers Creek WMA since several goals and objectives were not being met. These include:

GOAL 2. A diversity of habitat will be provided for the full range of native and other desired species. Sufficient amounts of interior or late-successional habitat as well as early-successional habitat will be provided to meet needs of all successional communities. Early successional habitat will be well distributed in all forest types, elevations, aspects, and slopes including riparian corridors.

GOAL 3. Enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types.

OBJECTIVE 3.8. Create and maintain an annual average of 300 acres above 3,000 feet elevation in early-successional habitats, achieving 3,000 acres within the first 10 years of Plan implementation. This acreage may be comprised of regenerating forests (0-10 years), utility rights-of-way, and open woodlands.

Since 1985, the quantity of early successional habitat on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (defined as stands \leq 10 years-of-age) has declined by over 60%. Early successional habitat comprised over 7 % of total forest acres in 1985 and today makes up less than 3 % of the Forests. (1985- 7.4%, 1990- 6.7%, 1995, 5.5%, 2000 2.6%). For the 4 Compartments included in the Coopers Creek project area, has declined from 13.9% in 1993, to 11.1% in 1998 to 0% in 2003. There currently are no stands less than 10 years-of age in the project area. This project will result in the creation of approximately 90 acres of early successional habitat (2.7% of project area), approximately 30 acre of which will be at or above 3000 feet elevation.

In order to meet the Forest Plan, the project involves the enhancement of early successional habitats along 5 roads in the Coopers Creek Wildlife Management Area utilizing a method called road daylighting.

The following roads are proposed for treatment:

1. Road to Mulky Gap food plot (0.5 mi.) (Brasstown RD)
2. Road to Cavender Gap food plots (0.5 mi.) (Toccoa RD)
3. Road to Fanny Gap food plots (2.1 mi.) (Brasstown RD)
4. Fanny Gap linear food plot (0.5 mi.) (Brasstown RD)
5. Road to check station food plot (2.0 mi.) (Toccoa RD)

Roads # 1-4 are located in Management Prescription 7.E.2 (Dispersed Recreation Areas with Vegetation Management). Road # 5 is located in Management Prescription 9.H (Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Plant Associations to Their Ecological Potential). Both Management prescriptions have objectives to maintain 4 to 10 percent of the prescription per decade in early-successional forest.

All of the roads are gated, used to access existing wildlife openings. Elevations range from approximately 2400 to 3100 feet. The roads near Fanny Gap (# 3 and 4) are at 3000 feet or greater in elevation and the road at Mulky Gap (#1) is just under 3000 feet in elevation. The remaining 2 roads are located at approximately 2400 feet. All of sites are located in the Toccoa River watershed.

The project is designed to improve wildlife habitat for a suite of species that need low growing grasses, legumes, and shrubs for foraging and nesting habitats. This project will benefit a wide variety of early successional species including species such as golden-winged warbler, prairie warbler, chestnut-sided warbler, and ruffed grouse. Populations of these and other early successional species are declining due to the loss of the young forest habitats.

The daylighting technique includes the removal of selected portions of the forest canopy along the edges of an existing road to allow sunlight to stimulate the growth of needed food sources and provide nesting habitat along road edges. This technique will be accomplished by commercial tree removal, cut and leave, and/or personal use firewood permits. The end result will be an improvement of habitat for wildlife species that use early successional forests. To keep the early successional habitat in the desirable condition, periodic mowing, burning, and/or chainsaw felling would need to occur on a 5 to 15 year basis. Road daylighting also has the additional benefit of reduced road maintenance costs. A daylighted road dries more quickly after rainfall, which reduces rutting and decreases the need for grading and gravelling.

The road surface itself will not be increased to any great extent. The management activities will take place approximately 30 to 100 feet on each side of the roads. There will be a wide variety in width dictated by terrain and overstory tree species. A portion of the overstory along these roads will be retained including selected oaks to provide for acorn production. In order to reduce soil erosion and protect streams, approximately 30 percent of the canopy will be retained overall, which includes trees on steep slopes and within the riparian corridor.

The areas adjacent to the existing wildlife openings associated with these roads also will be managed to

further enhance conditions for early successional species, with particular emphasis on golden-winged warbler. The areas surrounding the openings will be managed to provide a border of weedy herbaceous habitat and brushy habitat that will provide nesting habitat for golden-winged warbler and other songbirds. Several of these openings are adjacent to young regeneration areas. On these sites, tree-mowing equipment and or chainsaws will be used to set back the regeneration adjacent to the wildlife opening approximately 100-150 feet into the young stand. For those openings adjacent to older forests, treatment methods similar to the road daylighting portion of the project (commercial tree removal, cut and leave, firewood permits) will be used. Topographic conditions such as steep slopes will determine the how much of the area around the openings would be treated. These sites will be maintained by mowing or burning on a 5-15 year rotation.

Approximately 90 acres of early successional habitat will be created with this project, approximately 30 acres of which will be over 3000 feet. Upon completion, this project will contribute toward providing the desired habitat conditions for early successional species including high-elevation early successional species such as the golden-winged warbler.

The daylighting treatments are expected occur beginning in the summer of 2004 and should be completed by the spring of 2005. Bird surveys will be completed in Spring 2004 prior to treatment and will continue for at least 5 years post-treatment.

2. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement included listing the project on the Forests Schedule of Proposed Actions, a field trip with representatives from Georgia Forest Watch (April 18, 2003), and mailing of a scoping letter to approximately 90 individuals and organizations (March 21, 2003). A second scoping letter (clarification) was mailed June 18, 2003.

Fourteen scoping responses from twelve individuals or organizations were received on this project on or before the close of the comment period. The comments were used to refine the project and analysis. They also were used to explore the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and potential effects to those resources. Scoping both internally and externally raised no concerns that were determined to be extraordinary circumstances.

Comment letters and a review of the comments and responses are contained in the project file at the Brasstown Ranger District office in Blairsville, Georgia.

3. REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

We have determined that this project falls under categories in the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 that exclude it from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment. The specific category, identified in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 "Environmental Policy and Procedures" is Section 31.2 Category 6. – Wildlife habitat improvement activities.

We have also determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the project to have significant effects. Specifically:

- ❑ Ground disturbing activities will not take place on steep slopes. The canopy will be retained in areas along these roads that are greater than 45% slope. Appropriate mitigation measures will be applied such as prompt revegetation of exposed soils and installation of erosion control structures. Similar past projects in this area were determined to have no significant soil-related impacts.
- ❑ This project will not affect any federally Proposed, Endangered or Threatened species or their critical habitat (see Biological Evaluation in the project file.)
- ❑ No actions will take place in a floodplain, wetland, or municipal watershed.
- ❑ No congressionally designated area, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas will be affected by this project.
- ❑ This area is not within a current inventoried roadless area.
- ❑ The project is not within a research natural area.
- ❑ This project will not impact historic or prehistoric resources. No known historic or prehistoric sites that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by this project (see Cultural Resources Report in project file).
- ❑ The cumulative effects of this project combined with others in the foreseeable future will not be significant. The only recent or ongoing projects involving vegetation manipulation in the Coopers Creek vicinity are prescribed burns for fuel reduction. In addition to the early successional habitat enhancement project, a project to provide habitat for the cerulean warbler also is planned for the Coopers Creek WMA. It will involve the use of selective canopy treatments to enhance conditions for the cerulean warbler. Ground disturbance from this project is expected to be minimal, as all work will occur adjacent to existing roads. There also is a similar cerulean warbler project planned for the Ivylog Mountain area, north of Blairsville. This project is located in the Hiawassee and Nottely River Watershed, over 10 miles from the Coopers Creek project area.

4. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

This project is consistent with the revised Forest Plan. The actions in this project fully comply with the Forest-wide and the appropriate Management Prescription standards.

State-approved Best Management Practices (BMP's) will be met and this project will comply with the Clean Water Act.

The actions will not adversely affect any sites listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.

Implementing this decision will not adversely affect Federally listed threatend or endangered species or result in loss of any other's species viability, or create significant trends toward Federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act.

This project complies with the seven requirements of the National Forest Management Act related to vegetation manipulation (36 CFR 219.27(b)):

1. It is best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area based on the Forest-wide direction. This suitability is based on the potential environmental, biological, cultural resource, aesthetic, engineering, and economic impacts.
2. The areas will remain adequately stocked after treatment
3. This action has not been chosen primarily due to cost considerations, although this was taken into consideration.
4. This action has been chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.
5. The proposed actions will avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.
6. The action will provide the desired effects on water quantity and quality, wildlife and fish habitat, woody regeneration, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and resource yields.
7. The project area is adequately roaded and no new permanent or temporary roads are necessary to implement this decision. This proposal is practical in terms of transportation requirements, and the total costs of preparation and administration. This project does not require a project-level roads analysis because there are no permanent changes in access into the area, road standards will not change, and the project includes only maintenance activities.

5. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision may be implemented immediately.

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 Jim Wentworth by phone, letter, e-mail, or in person. The address of the Brasstown Ranger District office is 1881 Highway 515, Blairsville, GA 30512, and the phone number is (706) 745-2557. Contact Jim by e-mail at jwentworth@fs.fed.us

8. SIGNATURES AND DATE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIALS

/s/ Alan Polk

4/8/04

ALAN POLK
District Ranger
Brasstown Ranger District

DATE

/s/ Cassius M. Cash

4/12/04

CASSIUS M. CASH
District Ranger
Toccoa Ranger District

DATE