



File Code: 1950

Date: June 30, 2004

Dear Forest User:

**Project Name**

Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Improvement and Canebrake Restoration Project – Hitchiti Experimental Forest

**Proposed Action(s)**

The Oconee Ranger District, of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, is proposing to improve habitat for threatened and endangered (T&E) species, including habitat for red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) and canebrake restoration (rare community type). The proposed project area is approximately 1,420 acres in size and includes compartments 5, 6, and 8 of the Hitchiti Experimental Forest in Jones County, Georgia. The majority of the project area is composed of mature to overmature loblolly and mixed loblolly/shortleaf pine stands. Hardwood stands are primarily located adjacent to Caney Creek and adjacent to major stream and drainage ways. Patches of canebrakes are located immediately adjacent to Caney Creek. A vicinity map and list of treatments by stand is enclosed.

I recognize the interest members of the public have concerning management on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. This is why I am requesting your comments concerning the following proposals:

- Restore 15 acres of canebrake patches by reducing the overstory shade through girdling. The girdled trees will be left standing in place.
- Intermediate thinning (residual basal area of 60 square feet per acre) of approximately 790 acres of loblolly and mixed pined stands to improve forest health, reduce the short-term risk of Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) infestation, and to restore favorable RCW habitat conditions. Secondary treatments include prescribed burning, mechanical and herbicide applications for midstory control.
- Regenerate approximately 93 acres. Majority of sites were previously impacted by SPB mortality. Where patches of overstory trees are too dense a shelterwood harvest (residual basal area of 40 square feet) will occur. A combination of artificial and natural regeneration will be utilized. Prescribed fire and mechanical site preparation along with hand and herbicide release (when needed) is proposed in order to insure survival of seedlings.
- Implement uneven-aged management on approximately 30 acres of loblolly pine. The Southern Research Station will incorporate this treatment into their long-term research program on the Hitchiti Experimental Forest.
- Other associated activities include maintenance of the existing road system; no new system roads will be needed to implement the proposed action. Short temporary roads will be utilized to access units and allow landings to be located away from system roads to protect visual quality. Temporary roads will be closed when the project is complete. Secondary activities or improvements not already listed include RCW inserts, soil and water improvements (gully restoration), and spot herbicide treatment of invasive species.



### **Purpose of the Proposed Action**

This action provides an opportunity to work toward the desired future condition of the Forest as described in the 2004 Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan Revision (LRMP) and its Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Record of Decision (ROD). The proposed project (compartments 5,6 and 8) lies entirely within the Hitchiti Experimental Forest in Jones County, Georgia. The Management Area 3B prescription was assigned to the Hitchiti in the Revised LRMP. That portion of the Oconee Ranger District located south of Interstate 20, is part of a secondary recovery population for red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW), *Piccolies borealis*. Therefore the 8.D.1 Management Area direction, Sub HMA for the red-cockaded woodpecker is embedded within the 3B Management Area prescription and must be complied with (LRMP, pg 3-51). In addition, Caney Creek which forms the northern boundary of the project area contains patches of canebrakes, a rare community type, assigned Management Area prescription 9.F.

The LRMP emphasis for each Management Area is as follows:

**3.B – Experimental Forest:** Lands are dedicated to experimentation and education by implementing national and international research programs with the primary purpose of producing scientific information useful to the public and private sector management of the represented ecosystems (LRMP, pg 3-48 through 3-52).

**8.D.1 – Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Sub Habitat Management Areas:** ...the management emphasis is to provide suitable-to-optimal habitat conditions in areas containing small RCW populations within the larger, designated habitat management area. (8.D). These RCW populations are at the greatest risk of local extirpation and in need of immediate, aggressive management action to create and protect suitable habitat (LRMP, pg 3-138 through 3-144).

**9.F – Rare Communities (Canebrakes):** Canebrakes are important habitats for a number of species, and have declined in extent and quality greatly within historical times. Canebrake restoration efforts will occur on sites currently supporting cane. Management actions will be designed to increase the vigor, density, and area of existing patches of cane (LRMP, pg 3-157 through 3-166).

Implementation of this project would serve several purposes:

- Restore foraging and nesting habitat conditions preferred by the red cockaded woodpecker (RCW Recovery Plan)
- Restore rare canbrake communities
- Improve forest health and vigor of loblolly and mixed pine stands. Thereby potentially reducing:
  - The threat of SPB mortality in key RCW habitat (nesting and foraging).
  - The risk of catastrophic wildfire that could result from extensive SPB mortality.
  - Threats to public health and safety from extensive areas of standing snags.
  - Impacts to recreation and scenery from SPB mortality.
  - Habitat restoration costs associated with SPB mortality.
- Facilitate the research mission of the Hitchiti Experimental Forest (loblolly uneven-aged management)

**Comments**

Your specific comments to the proposed actions will help identify key issues and possible alternative ways of meeting the project's purpose and need. The key issues and alternatives will help focus the environmental analysis (effects) of the proposed actions.

If you would like to comment on this project, or you would like additional information about this project, please contact the Oconee Ranger District. Comments must be postmarked or received by **July 30, 2004**. Your comments can be sent to the address on the letterhead. If you have any questions regarding this project please contact Michael Murphy, Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District at (706) 695-6737, or myself at the District Office between 8:00 am and 4:00 pm Monday through Friday, (706) 485-7110.

We would also like to invite you to visit us at an open house at 10 a.m. at the Oconee Ranger Station on Thursday, July 15, 2004.

Sincerely,

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