



File Code: 2600,3400,1900

Date: June 25, 2004

Dear Forest User:

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 proposals to commercially thin 9000 acres of very dense young pine stands on the Oconee Ranger District. The thinning would be done in order to improve forest health and habitat for threatened and endangered species (T&E), including the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW). The stands proposed for thinning are located on the Oconee National Forest, Oconee Ranger District in Putnam, Jasper and Jones Counties, Georgia. The list of stands has been included (Appendix A) along with a vicinity map. Due to their size and bulk, detailed maps are available upon request at the Oconee Ranger District.

That portion of the Oconee Ranger District located south of Interstate 20, is part of a secondary recovery population for red-cockaded woodpecker, *Piccolies borealis*. Approximately 40 percent of the predominantly pine stands, located south of Interstate 20, are 17 to 35 years old. The stands are currently in an overstocked condition and contain nearly twice the number of stems per acre that are needed for optimal conditions for RCW foraging habitat. These stands constitute a large percentage of the potential future foraging habitat needed to meet RCW habitat recovery objectives. These overstocked stands are also more susceptible to loss from fire or Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) damage. Loss of these young stands would adversely affect the long-term production of quality RCW habitat and delay meeting RCW Recovery Plan objectives.

In addition to thinning activities, prescribed burning will occur to eliminate activity fuels and to meet RCW habitat restoration objectives. This will be accomplished as part of larger landscape scale fuel reduction burns (analyzed separately) to minimize the need for additional control lines. Other proposed activities include maintenance of the existing road system; no new system roads will be needed to access these stands. Short temporary roads, most less than a quarter mile in length, will be utilized to access units and to allow the landings to be located away from system roads to protect visual quality.

Some of the money received by the Forest Service from these thinnings would be used to to accomplish secondary activities or improvements inside the sale area boundary(s) after the thinning and burning is complete. Examples include installing nest boxes for songbirds, mechanical site preparation and artificial reforestation of existing SPB openings, hand release of existing young plantations from competing vegetation, spot treatment of invasive species using herbicides and restoration of existing gullies.

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 stands proposed for treatment are located in Management Area(s) 8.D and 8.D.1 Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Management Areas. The management guidelines and desired future condition for these areas is located in Chapter 3, pages 3-138 through 3-144 in the LRMP. Forest wide standards and guidelines (Chapter 2 – LRMP) and Georgia Best Management Practices (BMP's) have also been incorporated into the proposed action.



Implementation of this project would serve several purposes:

- Implement foraging habitat conditions preferred by the red cockaded woodpecker (RCW Recovery Plan)
- Improve forest health and vigor of overstocked young poletimber and small sawtimber loblolly pine stands. Thereby potentially reducing:
 - | The threat of SPB mortality in a key habitat component of RCW habitat (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.

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 Sandy Henning in the Forest Supervisor's Office at (770)297-3064, 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