

# **DECISION MEMO**

## **Southern Pine Beetle Prevention**

### **Thinning**

#### **Lower Stekoa Hydrologic Unit**

#### **in Fiscal Years 2004-2005**

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

## **1. DECISION; PURPOSE AND NEED FOR PROJECT**

**I have decided to approve the proposal to thin three stands using non-commercial methods. The three stands are located in the lower Stekoa Creek hydrologic unit, and include a total of approximately 85 acres. More specifically, the stands are between Wolf Creek Church Road and Stekoa Creek, and are called Areas T4, T5 and T6 on the attached map and in the scoping letter. The thinnings will likely be completed in the next six months.**

Existing conditions within these three forest communities include 13-14 year old loblolly pine trees at densities ranging from approximately 400 to 650 trees per acre, or a spacing of approximately 8-10 feet apart. Work under this decision will reduce the density to approximately 150-200 trees per acre (approximate spacing of 16 feet) of loblolly pine with an emphasis on releasing shortleaf pine and other native hardwoods within these forest communities.

This project is designed to help meet Objectives 3.1, 8.1, and 40.1 in the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (Forest Plan) as follows:

<b>Forest Plan Goal</b>	<b>Objective to Meet Goal</b>	<b>Project Description</b>
Goal 3 (page 2-6): Enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types.	Objective 3.1: Restore shortleaf pine forests on sites where they once occurred.	Shortleaf pine will be released when present and able to respond to release.
Goal 8 (page 2-7): Contribute to restoration of native tree species whose role in forest ecosystems: (a) has been reduced by past land use; or (b) is threatened by insects and disease, fire exclusion, forest succession, or other factors.	Objective 8.1: Maintain shortleaf pine forests by thinning trees.	Same as above.
Goal 40 (page 2-39): Reduce vulnerability to native pests [southern pine beetle] through appropriate management.	Objective 40.1: Reduce stem density of overstocked loblolly pine stands.	Thin as described above and recommended in Appendix F of the Forest Plan, page F-55.

Thinning in these stands will provide more growing space for the remaining trees, thereby reducing the stress of competition for sunlight, water and nutrients. This reduction in stress will substantially reduce the risk of future infestations by the southern pine beetle. Thinning will also increase the abundance of shortleaf pine and native hardwoods in the overstory and understory, as well as allowing understory and herbaceous species to flourish within the gaps created by these thinnings.

The three locations are within Management Prescription (Prescription) 9.A.3, *Watershed Restoration Areas*. The long-term goal in this prescription is to improve conditions to showcase restored and

resilient watersheds where proper multiple use management practices are applied (Forest Plan, page 3-153). The thinnings, as specified above, will meet this emphasis.



Dense loblolly pine stand on the Tallulah Ranger District

Small portions of the project areas will be within riparian corridors, Prescription 11. Thinning within these zones will emphasize species diversity, and native hardwoods will be released where present (Forest Plan, page 3-172), while meeting tree density levels and other applicable standards of the Best Management Practices (BMP's) for Georgia (*Georgia's Best Management Practices*, pages 10-11)

I have determined that this action falls under Category 6 of the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Section 31.2, which includes a category of actions which do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment (Gatins and SAPB concern, 5/11/04). Specifically, this category includes timber stand improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides and do not require more than one mile of road construction. There is no road construction included in this decision.

I have also determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the project to have significant effects. Therefore, neither an environmental impact statement nor an environmental assessment will need to be prepared (Gatins concern, 5/11/04). Specifically:

- ❑ This project will not take place on steep slopes or highly erosive soils. The "Soil Survey of Rabun and Towns Counties, Georgia" (available for review at the Tallulah District office) shows that soils in these areas have a moderate erosion hazard and slight to moderate equipment limitations based on the slope and soil series present (project file.) Moderate erosion hazard means that "some attention must be given to controlling erosion." Thinning as planned using chainsaws and possibly other hand methods will have negligible effects on erosion, sedimentation, and soil compaction (SABP concern, 5/11/04).
- ❑ The action will not affect any federally Endangered or Threatened species, nor impact any Forest Sensitive species (SABP concern, 5/11/04). It will not result in a trend toward federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, or a loss of viability on the Forest. Zone Wildlife Biologist Andy Gaston has reviewed Forest Service files and no PETS (Proposed, Endangered, Threatened, or Sensitive) species were identified that may be impacted by the thinnings. No known locations of PETS species were identified in Forest Service files or in the Georgia Natural Heritage Program database for the project locations (see project file.)
- ❑ No jurisdictional wetlands (as defined in the Forest Service Manual 2527.05--8), floodplains, or municipal watersheds will be affected by this project.

- ❑ No congressionally designated area, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas will be affected by this project. The project is not within a research natural area.
- ❑ The thinnings are not within a currently inventoried roadless area (SABP concern, 5/11/04).
- ❑ No known historic properties eligible for or listed in the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by this project (project file).
- ❑ The project takes place in the Stekoa Creek watershed, listed as impaired due to excessive sedimentation by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for the State of Georgia (303(d) list). Thinning methods in this decision will not disturb the forest floor and therefore will not contribute to sediment loads within this watershed. There is also no road construction involved. Therefore, this circumstance is not considered extraordinary within the overall context of this project.
- ❑ These as well as other proposed thinning projects are not connected to one another in any environmentally binding way. In other words, one thinning does not trigger or depend on one another. Therefore, these thinning projects are considered similar (same methods, some have same timing and geography) but not connected in any way (Gatins concern, 5/11/04). In addition, these actions are considered to not have significant effects, individually or cumulatively (see above).
- ❑ None of these three stands display any characteristics meeting the criteria for old growth as described in “*Guidance for Conserving and Restoring Old Growth Forest Communities on National Forests in the Southern Region*,” (available for review at the Tallulah Ranger District office) and by following guidance laid out in the Forest Plan (pages 2-16 to 2-18)(SABP concern, 5/11/04).
- ❑ These thinning actions will not change (open, close, construct, reconstruct, or obliterate) any road conditions within or nearby the areas to be treated, therefore no road analysis is necessary (SABP concern, 5/11/04).

## 2. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Scoping both internally and externally raised no concerns that were determined to be extraordinary circumstances.

A letter detailing this project was sent out to 102 individuals, agencies and public organizations in April of 2004 (see project file, Tallulah Ranger District.) Several responses were received. Some comments were supportive (Myers, 4/22/2004; Chattooga Conservancy, 5/10/2004) while two others raised concerns (Gatins, Georgia Forest Watch, 5/11/2004; Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project (SABP), 5/11/2004). My staff have answered these questions within this document and referenced the letter where the question can be found.

In addition, we answered questions in the field with Joe Gatins on May 11, 2004.

### **3. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS**

This project is consistent with the Forest Plan. The actions in this project fully comply with the Forest-wide standards (Forest Plan, 2-3 through 2-72) as well as the Prescription 9.A.3 and 11 standards (Forest Plan, pages 3-153 to 3-156 and 3-171 to 3-182).

This project will comply with the Recreational Fisheries Executive Order by enhancing riparian corridors and producing no additional sediment within the lower Stekoa Creek watershed.

As discussed above, state-approved BMP's will be met and this project will comply with the Clean Water Act.

This project complies with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b):

- Thinning is appropriate in these forest communities to meet the multiple -use goals established in the Forest Plan. (see pages 1-2 for discussion)
- Actions have not been chosen to maximize dollar return or produce the greatest output of timber, although these factors were taken into consideration. (see page 1)
- Actions have been chosen after considering the potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands. (see page 1)
- The actions will enhance and improve the productivity of the sites and ensure conservation of soil and water resources. (pages 1-4)
- The projects provide the desired effects on all affected resource yields, including water quality.
- The actions are practical in terms of thinning requirements and costs.

### **4. IMPLEMENTATION DATE**

This decision will be implemented in Fiscal Year 2004, with some work possibly taking place in Fiscal Year 2005.

### **5. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES**

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

### **6. CONTACT PERSON**

For further information concerning this decision or the appeal process contact Steve Cole 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 Steve by e-mail at [sncole@fs.fed.us](mailto:sncole@fs.fed.us).

### **7. SIGNATURE AND DATE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL**

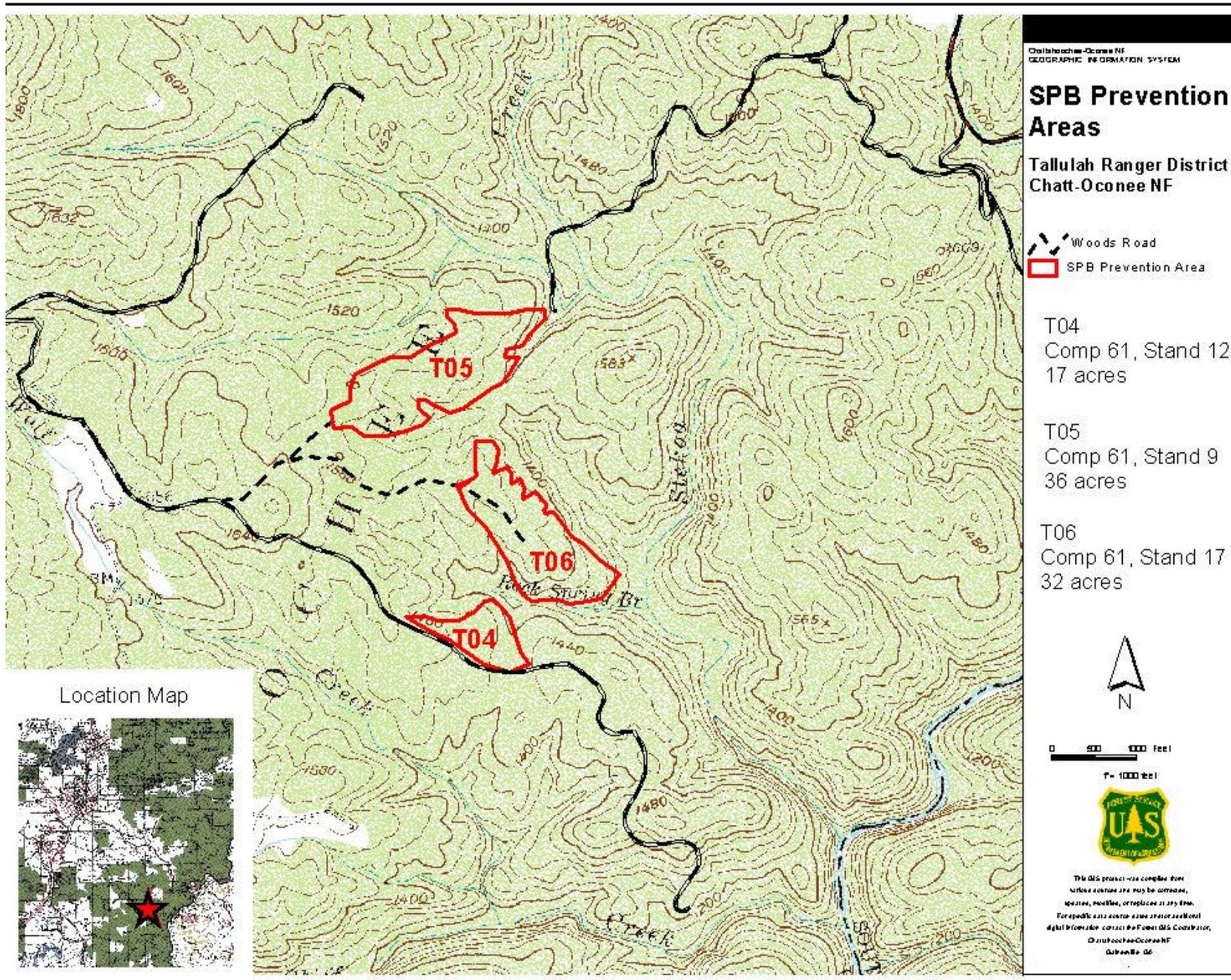
*/s/ David W. Jensen*

*July 20, 2004*

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**DAVID W. JENSEN**

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**DATE**

District Ranger



Attachment – Map – SPB Prevention Thinning - 1