

Decision Memo

Alaculsy Valley Road Reconstruction Project

Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District
Chattahoochee-Ocoee National Forest
Murray County, Georgia

I have decided to approve the proposal to reconstruct the portion of the Alaculsy Valley Road (Forest System Road 16) between the Conasauga River bridge and the Georgia-Tennessee state line (1.2 miles). The road base of FS 16 will be recontoured to improve and correctly manage drainage. Base material will be added and graded to a “crowned” condition and topped with three inches of surface gravel. Culverts will be replaced with new ones of appropriate size and alignment. Ditches will be reconstructed to manage runoff.

A sharply curved segment of FS 16 is proposed for relocation in order to increase the distance between it and the Conasauga River. A new segment of road (0.1 mile), which bypasses the curve, will be constructed.

A new arch culvert will be installed on FS 16 spanning a small tributary stream entering the Conasauga River near the intersection of East Cowpen Road (FS 51). The existing culverts will be removed and replaced with the larger, “bottomless” culvert. The addition of this large culvert will necessitate the raising of the road elevation with fill material.

Mitigation measures to protect water quality during the project include: 1) the use of silt fencing between the road and the river, 2) the placement of slash and brush in the abandoned roadway after the road is ripped, seeded, and mulched, 3) the stabilization of fill material above and around the “bottomless culvert” with as much rock as is necessary, 4) the placement of four tons riprap at the ends of each culvert and ditch, 5) seeding and mulching all disturbed soils during construction, 6) the placement of extra silt fencing and hay bales near the inlet and outlet of the new “bottomless culvert”, 7) no concrete may be used in the construction of the culvert, 8) the effects of sedimentation on the Conasauga River section adjacent to this project will be monitored daily during construction and afterward on a periodic basis.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The Alaculsy Valley Road follows the Conasauga River through the flat, bottomland valley created by the river. The valley is forested by mature bottomland hardwoods with the accompanying deep soils and flat topography. The road was formerly a county road, and its construction probably predates the National Forest. Its condition is an ongoing problem due to its low position on the flat topography and proximity to the river; it frequently floods in periods of heavy rainfall, and contributes sediment to the Conasauga in the sections nearest to it. The Conasauga River, a Coosa River tributary, is among the most diverse rivers within the southeastern United States in terms of fish and freshwater mollusks. Several federally listed endangered and threatened species, as well as a variety of abundant aquatic species are found there, and the protection of the river and its water quality is of utmost importance. A potential sediment source such as the Alaculsy Valley Road should be repaired. This project provides an opportunity to work toward the desired future condition of the Forest as described in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (LRMP) and its Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

I have determined that this action falls within Category #4 (“Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landline boundaries”) of Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Section 31.1b for categorical exclusions. These actions have been determined to have no significant effect on the quality of the human environment, either individually or cumulatively, and are therefore categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA).

FINDING OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

Based on interdisciplinary team findings, I have determined that no extraordinary circumstances exist that could cause the actions involved with reconstructing and relocating a section of Alaculsy Valley Road to have significant effects. The following were considered in the decision making process:

- The biological evaluation completed for this project determined there would be no adverse effects on federally listed threatened, endangered, or Regional Forester listed sensitive aquatic or terrestrial species, and that improved habitat conditions would likely benefit the species occurring in the Conasauga River. Informal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was conducted and resulted in their concurrence.
- This action complies with the National Historic Preservation Act.
- This action will not negatively affect wetlands, floodplains, steep slopes, erosive soils, or municipal watersheds.
- This project does not contain any Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas. Additionally, the areas are not located within a Research Natural Area and are not within an inventoried roadless area.
- This proposal is consistent with state and other federal environmental laws and regulations such as state approved Best Management Practices, the Endangered Species Act, Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

As required by the National Forest Management Act of 1976, I have determined that this action is consistent with the Chattahoochee-Oconee Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended. It adheres to applicable standards, guidelines, and monitoring requirements in the Forest Plan, which includes the soil and water protection measures of the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Appalachian Mountains.

This project complies with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b) by following the Forest-wide standards and guidelines as mentioned above. Specifically:

- This project is best suited to the multiple-use goals established for these areas. This involved an analysis of impacts in relation to those expected by the Forest Plan. Refer to the earlier discussions of the project description, mitigation measures, and the determination that no extraordinary circumstances exist.

- This action was chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees, adjacent stands, and T&E species.
- This project will avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.
- This project will provide the desired effects on fuel loadings, water, wildlife, fish, tree regeneration, forage, recreation, visual quality, and other resources.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Scoping both internally and externally has not indicated that extraordinary circumstances exist that might cause this action to have significant effects on the environment (*FSH 1909.15, Section 30.3 –3*).

Internal scoping began for this project in June, 2000. On June 14, 2002, a scoping letter was mailed to the individuals, organizations, or agencies who have indicated an interest in projects on this district. The list of people receiving the scoping letter is located in the project file.

The district ranger and district civil engineering technician met with members of Georgia ForestWatch on-site to discuss the project during July 2002. They provided written comments after the meeting.

Personnel from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were asked to comment on the proposal; a biologist and an engineer from that agency met with Forest Service personnel on-site on May 2, 2003. They concurred with the Forest Service biological evaluation that the project will have no adverse effects to any proposed, endangered, threatened, or sensitive (PETS) species on the condition that the abandoned roadbed be ripped, seeded, and mulched prior to placement of slash and brush.

Four letters were received from the public. The concerns that were stated in these letters were analyzed and in some cases, have shaped the final decision. The concerns that were voiced can be summarized in the following categories:

- 1) Concerns that off-road vehicles would utilize the old roadbed after the new segment is constructed; that ground-breaking of the old roadbed would be a sediment source (*Georgia ForestWatch*).

Response: Slash and brush, including trees and stumps, from the new road segment will be placed in the old roadbed, making it impassible. The area will quickly revegetate to woody vegetation following ripping, seeding, and mulching (a condition of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). Silt fencing will be placed below the roadbed as a precaution. The old roadbed will be monitored closely to ensure that the desired result is obtained.

- 2) Concern about the new road segment being adjacent to a small cemetery (*Georgia ForestWatch*).

Response: The new segment will be constructed approximately 300 feet from the cemetery and will not affect it, or the current access to it (a trail). The Forest archeologist visited the site as well as the cemetery and gave clearance to the project. The project was also reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Office and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians cultural resources office, who concurred with the “no effect” opinion.

- 3) Concern that the new road segment will be too steep, is still too close to the river, and that another road location should be evaluated (*Georgia ForestWatch, Shepherd Howell*).

Response: The proposed relocation route has been selected by the Forest engineer, with consultation and an on-site visit by the Regional engineer. The maximum grade of the new segment will be 10% (Forest standard). Alternative routes proposed both internally and by interested public were much steeper and longer, and would result in an enormous volume of soil disturbance. The proposed relocation segment is approximately 500 feet from the river, and based on experience with other roads on the Forest and research with the Coweeta Hydrologic Lab, the distance should provide an effective sediment filter/barrier (personal communication with Dick Rightmyer, Forest soil scientist).

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8(a)(4). Implementation of this decision may begin immediately. For further information concerning this decision contact Ruth Stokes at (706) 695-6736, or by e-mail at rbstokes@fs.fed.us.

SIGNATURE AND DATE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

/s/ Debra L. Whitman

May 19, 2003

DEBRA L. WHITMAN
District Ranger

Date