

DECISION MEMO

Nicholson Tract Management Actions Fiscal Years 2002-2004

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

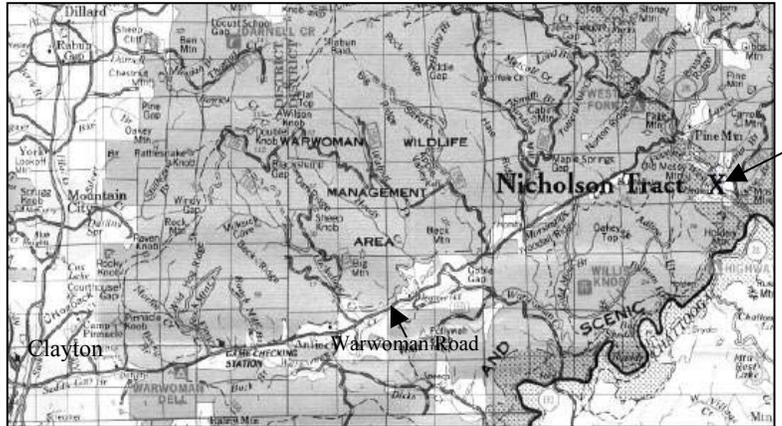
1. DECISION

I have decided to approve certain management actions on the Nicholson Tract. This area is located on the West Fork of the Chattooga River on both sides of Highway 28 in northeast Rabun County (see map.)

Existing Roads:

Many of the roads on the tract will be closed. Closing will include completing any needed erosion control measures by seeding, fertilizing and mulching of exposed soil. A berm or gate will be built to prevent motorized access along with moving material into the roadbeds to prevent illegal all-terrain vehicle (ATV) access. The roads will be signed as closed.

Actions approved for each road are described and shown in the map below:



Road #1: Any active erosion will be treated as stated above. A gate will be installed on this road and opened seasonally from mid-March through December of each year. This will protect the road during the time of the year that is the hardest on our roads.

Road #2: This road is located very close to Camp Branch. The road will be closed using a gate. Revegetation will be completed as described above.

Road #3: This road has minimal erosion and sedimentation concerns and a gate already controls the access into the tract. The gate will be left as is and minor maintenance will be completed to correct any siltation problems. This road will be used for administrative access only.

Road #4: This road starts near the remains of the main house and goes south, forking and leading into the opening

on the West Fork. This road will be closed by berm approximately 100 feet beyond the house ruins and any exposed soil will be revegetated. The road beyond this point will be obliterated to eliminate any possible all-terrain vehicle use. Depending on the plans for moving and/or salvage of structures, the road closure may be delayed or reopened to provide access.

Road #5: This road runs north from Highway 28 and ends at the northern end of the Nicholson Tract just uphill from Camp Branch. Culverts in this road will be pulled out to avoid future sedimentation problems due to pipe blockage, and the segments laid back to form broad-based dips. Culverts in drains will be pulled and the road fill excavated and laid back to restore the watercourse to approximately the surface and slope that was present before the fill. The area will be outsloped, and broad-based dips and/or lead-off ditches will be installed where needed to keep water velocity and sediment loads low. Most culverts providing cross drainage will be removed. The southern segment of Road #5 (south of the perennial stream crossing – approximately 2/3rds of the entire length) will be treated as described above and maintained as a permanent linear wildlife opening. The wildlife opening will be planted with clovers and grasses and mowed periodically. Access will be restricted to administrative use only using a gate and guard rail barricades. Above the perennial stream crossing and inside the Wild and Scenic River Corridor, the area will eventually revert to a forested condition. To create habitat for amphibians, small pits will be dug at a width of at least 10 feet in diameter and at least 1-2 feet in depth. These pits will hold water during the winter breeding months for salamanders and frogs and will be absent of predators such as fish.

Road #6: This is a spur off of Road #5, and will be treated the same as the portion of Road #5 south of the perennial stream crossing. Outsloping and cross drainage using broad based dips or lead-off ditches will be installed and culverts will be removed. The roadbed will be developed into a permanent linear wildlife opening, including the planting of clovers and grasses and mowing periodically. Access to this area will be controlled by the entrance to Road #5.

Roads #7 & #8: These roads are currently well vegetated and Road #8 is already closed. These roads will be surveyed for any exposed soil or any need for dips or lead-off ditches. They will be closed with berms near Highway 28. The closure of Road #7 may be delayed or the road reopened for moving and/or salvaging of material from structures located on this road.

Road #9: This road will be obliterated by moving fill from the outside to the inside of the roadbed to restore the slope closer to the original slope of the terrain. The area will be seeded, fertilized and mulched using a combination of erosion blankets and straw. Hay bales and/or silt fencing will be used extensively in drains and across the slope to filter overland flow and reduce the velocity of concentrated flows of water. Native trees will be planted in the restored area. Closure of the road will still provide pedestrian access to the shoreline fishing trail along the east bank of the West Fork of the Chattooga River.

Mitigation measures to be followed on all roads include:

- Broad based drainage dips or lead-off ditches will be installed on all roads where needed to ensure adequate road surface drainage (Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests (called the “Forest Plan,” for short,) page 4-37.)

Spacing between the dips will be based on recommendations in “Georgia’s Best Management Practices for Forestry,” (known as “BMP booklet,” for short) page 16.

- Outfall from dips and lead-off ditches will be mitigated by using surge stone, hay bales or silt fencing to minimize erosion moving toward watercourses (BMP booklet, page 24.)
- Prompt revegetation will take place in order to minimize exposure of mineral soil to raindrop erosion (BMP booklet, page 17; Forest Plan, page 4-39.) Revegetation will include fertilization, seeding of grasses, and mulching with straw or erosion blankets. Grass seed used in areas where erosion control is critical will include tall fescue, creeping red fescue, orchard grass, browntop millet, and ryegrass. In areas where erosion control is less critical kobe lespedeza, hairy vetch and clovers will be planted to increase the wildlife value. Native grasses and wildflowers will be planted in areas where rapid erosion control is not a critical concern. Native plants used will include little bluestem, wild rye, asters, blazing star, black-eyed susan and others.
- Before, during and after photo monitoring will be completed on each road to monitor and track project success.

Horse Camp:

There are strong feelings on both sides of this issue. I understand both the desire for the site and the concern over that use of the site. Based on all considerations, I have decided to not dedicate any portion of this tract to a horse camp.

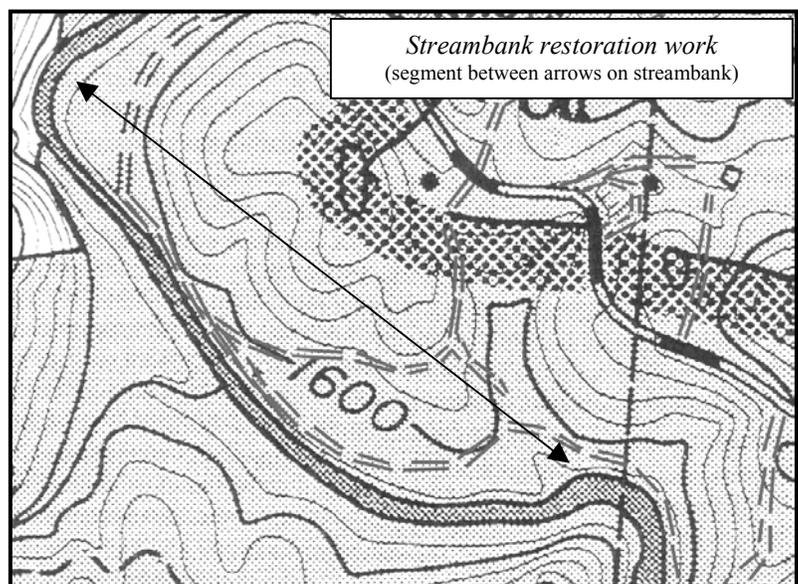
Structure Management:

The buildings and other structures will be offered to educational and nonprofit institutions such as Foxfire and other interpretive associations, as well as area schools, to facilitate moving any or all of the existing structures to a location for permanent protection and preservation. Structures that are not moved initially will be offered to other interested educational organizations. All remaining structures will be disposed of in compliance with recommendations received from the State Historic Preservation Officer.

Following removal, sites will be restored by planting native vegetation including the use of grass seed composed of big and little bluestem and indiagrass and the planting of native trees and shrubs.

Steambank Restoration:

Several small segments of streambank that are actively eroding will be stabilized. These areas range in length from 10-50 feet and involve minimal resloping (primarily using hand tools) of the streambank, planting with native vegetation (including use of willow cuttings and cane) and, where necessary, using biodegradable covers and deflection logs to stabilize the area until vegetation takes hold.



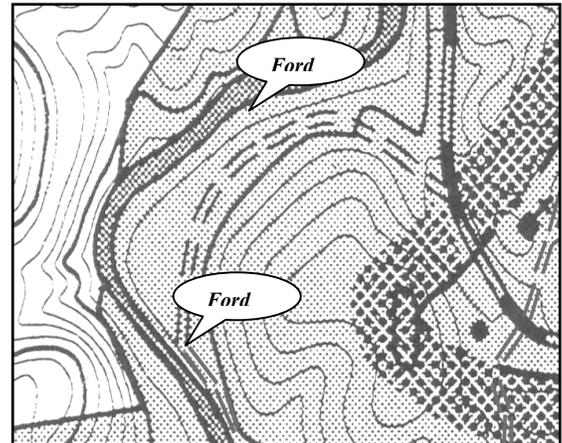
Trees, shrubs and grasses (including cane) will be planted along a majority of the east streambank near the openings (see map) to initiate the formation of a forested riparian area. Species planted may include flowering dogwood, red maple, white oak, southern red oak, scarlet oak, chestnut oak, yellow poplar, hemlock and others. No revetments are planned for in this decision.

Ford Rehabilitation:

The two old fords existing on the tract (see map below) will be seeded, mulched and blocked using boulders. Native shrubs may be planted in the streambanks of the fords. Hay bales will be used to temporarily filter overland flow into the river until vegetation is established.

Clean-up:

Cables across the West Fork will be taken down, old farm implements removed and trash picked up.



Actions Not Decided:

One proposal that came up was an interpretive trail, signs and facilities. I have come to know some of the long and important history of this site, but I also know the limits of our resources and law enforcement personnel. I believe that it is important to provide trails and interpretive information to the public, and so I will propose an interpretive facility and parking area in the future commensurate with the forecast of our ability to maintain and protect the site from vandalism and simple wear and tear. Therefore I am deferring a decision on this important issue until later.

Another proposal involved use of the two existing openings as permanent wildlife openings. Wildlife openings have a variety of potential methods that can be used to manage them to benefit wildlife. Methods such as discing, fertilization, seeding, prescribed burning and mowing can all improve the value of these openings for various wildlife. This type of project was not proposed in the public involvement letter since I was primarily interested in protection of the existing resources on the site. This activity will be considered in a separate project proposal in the future. In the meantime, maintenance of the openings by mowing will continue the status quo until a new decision is made.

I 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. Specifically, the road work falls under Category 4, section 31.1b, which includes repair and maintenance of roads. The segments of road now to be maintained as wildlife openings fall under Category 6 of section 31.2, which includes wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include use of herbicides or construction of over one mile of low standard road. The streambank restoration and ford rehabilitation fall under Category 7, section 31.2, which includes modification of stream improvement structures using native materials. The regeneration actions in and adjacent to the streambank fall under Category 5 of section 31.2, which includes regeneration of an area to native tree species.

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

- All roads (and the structures they access) where soil disturbance is planned are rated as having a “moderate” erosion hazard and a “slight” or “moderate” equipment limitation (from "Soil Survey of Rabun and Towns Counties, Georgia," available for review at the Tallulah District office) (project file.) A moderate erosion hazard means that “some attention must be given to controlling erosion.” Mitigating measures that apply to erosion include prompt revegetation of exposed soils and installation of broad-based dips that will minimize erosion within the area and minimize sediment being carried off the site. The streambank stabilization, regeneration and ford rehabilitation will take place within a well-drained floodplain with a “slight” erosion hazard and “moderate” equipment limitations. The moderate equipment limitation in this case is seasonal wetness and this project will not take place during any flooding. The hazards and the mitigation are ordinary and routine and clearly are not significant within the context of this project.
- This project will not affect any federally Endangered or Threatened species, nor impact any Forest Sensitive species. It will not result in a trend toward federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, or a loss of viability on the Forest (see project file.)
- No jurisdictional wetlands (as defined in the Forest Service Manual 2527.05--8) or municipal watersheds will be affected by this project (project file). The streambank restoration and the riparian tree planting will take place within a floodplain. In this case, the floodplain area is made up of soils in the Transylvania – Toxaway complex, described as having a high probability of frequent, very brief, or brief flooding during winter and spring. These two activities have the objective of restoration, and will not jeopardize the character of the floodplain.
- 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 Nicholson Tract is not within a current inventoried roadless area.
- This project will only impact historic buildings located there. No other known historic or prehistoric sites which are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by this project (project file). The effect of this project on the historic buildings is necessary for reasons of public safety and the safety of the buildings. A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) has been signed between the U.S. Forest Service and the Georgia State Historic Preservation Office (GASHPO) agreeing to strict stipulations in undertaking the removal and/or disposal of structures on the tract. Execution of the stipulations in the MOA will make the effects on these historic structures insignificant.
- The cumulative effects of this project combined with others in the foreseeable future will not be significant.

2. PURPOSE AND NEED

After acquisition of the Nicholson tract, I have wanted to take some immediate steps to move the area toward a condition that will meet some of the goals for National Forest System land on the Chattahoochee – Oconee National Forest. These goals include to “protect and improve the quality of renewable resources;” “conserve soil and water resources and not allow significant or permanent impairment of the productivity of the land;” “preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage;” and “provide for a diversity of plant and animal communities and tree species to meet multiple-use objectives” (Forest Plan, page 4-1 and 4-2.)

I also wanted to move the portion of the area within the Wild and Scenic River corridor (see map) toward a condition described in the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River Plan (Appendix M of the Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests Plan (called the “Chattooga River Plan,” for short); Forest Plan, pages 4-79 To 4-82.) Objectives for this include improving the scenic attractiveness and maintaining high quality habitat for fish (page M-4, Objectives.)

The road treatments (obliteration, outsloping, dip/lead-off ditch installation, revegetation, closure, tree planting) will help meet the objective of erosion protection (Forest Plan, page 4-37) and move the area toward one where soil and water resources are conserved. The obliteration of Road #9 along with the revegetation and mitigation measures will improve scenic attractiveness to floaters on the West Fork of the Chattooga River and reduce the amount of sediment that enters the West Fork at this point.

The successful transfer of buildings to other less remote locations will preserve the historic value of the buildings while protecting Forest visitors from existing unsafe structural conditions and future vandalism of these buildings at their present location.

The stream bank restoration and ford rehabilitation actions will stabilize banks and begin the process of reforestation along the banks of the West Fork of the Chattooga River. The willow cuttings will sprout and help stabilize the sediment.

3. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

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

On March 14, 2001 a letter was given wide distribution in asking for input as to how to manage the Nicholson Tract. Several responses were received from members of the public as well as organizations and agencies.

On October 16, 2001, a letter of proposal was sent out to over 120 people (by letter or e-mail.) Responses were also received from the public on this letter. A significant feature article in the Clayton Tribune also highlighted our request for input.

Comment letters are contained in the project file at the Tallulah Ranger District office in Clayton, Georgia.

For the most part, our proposal to close most roads and donate the structures to interpretive organizations has been supported by most respondents. Streambank restoration work was also generally supported.

My staff have tried to respond to concerns in these responses throughout this Decision Memo.

4. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

This project is consistent with the Forest Plan, as amended. The actions in this project fully comply with the Forest-wide standards and guidelines (Forest Plan, 4-12 through 4-49).

The actions are designed to comply with all management requirements in the Record of Decision (ROD) for the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Appalachian Mountains, which was an amendment to the Forest Plan.

This project will comply with the Recreational Fisheries Executive Order by minimizing erosion and sediment that may reach the West Fork of the Chattooga River.

State-approved Best Management Practices (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):

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. No regeneration harvesting is proposed. A few dead trees needed for streambank restoration work may be taken from stands adjacent to the two openings. Some trees and shrubs may be transplanted to areas along road clearings and stream banks to speed up the reforestation process by native grasses, shrubs and trees.
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, regeneration of desired tree species, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and resource yields.
7. The proposal will need no additional road building. Most roads within the area will be closed, and Road #9 will be obliterated. This proposal is practical in terms of transportation requirements, and total costs of preparation and administration.

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 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.

8. SIGNATURE AND DATE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

DAVID W. JENSEN
District Ranger

DATE