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October 26, 2009

David W. Jensen, District Ranger
Chattooga River District, Chattahoochee National Forest
9975 Highway 441S
Lakemont, Georgia 30552
dwjensen@fs.fed.us

BY E-MAIL

Re: Watergauge project and meeting on October 14, 2009.

Dear Mr. Jensen:

On behalf of Georgia ForestWatch (GFW), thank you for withdrawing your July 8, 2009, decision on the Watergauge project and for inviting us to meet with you and other Chattahoochee National Forest staff on October 14 to discuss that project. We found the meeting at the District office and the subsequent field trip informative and hope that you did as well. We also believe the meeting was productive in resolving several areas of concern and in leading to better mutual understanding about other concerns.

You and other District staff explained that the six young (17-40 year old) pine stands¹ that were part of the Watergauge project should be thinned to improve forest condition and to reduce risk of infestation by Southern Pine Beetle. You also further described the desired bog enhancement. You proposed to categorically exclude a new decision to undertake the bog enhancement and the pine thinning, under "category 6" for timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement. Then, the four stands remaining from the Watergauge project² would be considered and analyzed for woodland creation in an Environmental Assessment. You suggested that, if additional stands that are more appropriate for woodland creation are identified and suggested by GFW, the District could consider substituting them or adding them to the woodland project. If more appropriate stands are found, GFW probably will prefer that they be substituted for less appropriate stands.

The bog enhancement and the pine thinning may be acceptable to GFW if the following specific aspects of the project, discussed at the meeting at the office and in the field, are documented and committed to in the Decision Memo (DM). Most of these points were discussed during the in-office meeting and field trip on the 14th, and we discussed the others by phone on October 21.

¹ Compartment 62, stands 19 and 27, and compartment 67, stands 02, 03, 05 and 36.

² Compartment 67, stands 21, 24, 29, 30.

- The DM will describe the bog enhancement activities, as did the DM for enhancement of Tom's Swamp and Keener Bog. Bog enhancement would entail mechanical removal of undesirable shrubs, small-diameter trees and saplings less than six inches in diameter inside bog boundaries using hand tools, as well as the girdling of a few larger diameter trees where needed to allow sunlight to reach the bog.
- Regarding the 100' riparian corridor around the bog (starting at the outer edge of the bog and extending for 100'): In the bog and within 50' of the edge of the bog, shrubs and saplings six inches or less in diameter will be cut and removed and some mature trees will be girdled. The area 50' to 100' from the edge of the bog will be thinned to about 60-70 sq. ft. basal area (BA). Trees will be cabled out of the riparian area and there will be no operation of wheeled or tracked equipment in the riparian corridor.
- A map of the bog, its riparian corridor and activities planned within the corridor will be included in the DM.
- In other stands to be thinned, the Forest Service will delineate and mark ephemeral stream zones and the management prescription 11 riparian corridors along intermittent and perennial streams. There will be no operation of wheeled or tracked equipment within those zones and corridors. The Forest Service will, of course, adhere to management prescription 11. The agency's view is that prescription 11 allows pine to be thinned within riparian corridors. In keeping with the objectives of this thinning project, hardwoods will not be removed within those zones or corridors.
- The pine thinning will be to 60-70 BA. Hardwoods will be retained.
- During the field trip, Forest Service staff explained the differences between the proposed pine thinning and woodland creation. We want to be clear that it is essential that the pine thinning not be characterized at any point as "woodland" creation.
- The timber sale for the commercial pine thinning will be a sawtimber and pulpwood sale only and all tree tops and slash will be retained and scattered on site and/or used to block and cover temporary skid trails used during the sale.
- To provide time for slash to "melt down" to avoid an excessively hot fire, the area will not be prescribed burned for at least 2-3 years.
- The prescribed burns will be ignited first on the ridges and allowed to burn downslope. Further ignitions in the mid-slope area may be used to control the intensity of the burn. Fire will not be ignited within lower slopes, drains and riparian areas or forced into those areas.
- It is our understanding that at least four "permanent" monitoring plots will be placed in the Watergauge project area. We ask the Forest Service to confirm this and to clarify the boundaries of that area (the 2002 decision's prescribed burn area or the 2009 decision's project area). Monitoring will include, but will not be limited to, plant species, overstory and depth of litter and duff. We are glad to see this monitoring at the plant species level.
- The need for and timing of repeated prescribed burning will be assessed based on results of monitoring. Decisions regarding repeated burning will consider and provide for regeneration of the next, replacement overstory (ideally regenerating a greater hardwood component).
- The DM also should clarify which of the old skid trails or old roadbeds will be "temporary roads" and which will be "skid trails" for this project.

We also have discussed several other points regarding this project, as well as the FLN demonstration area and prescribed burning generally:

- The District will let GFW know when the ephemeral stream zones and riparian corridors referenced above have been marked.
- The District agreed to provide to GFW a map or maps showing the 16,000-acre FLN demonstration area and the locations of prescribed burn areas and monitoring plots within the demo area, a copy of the monitoring protocol and data collection sheets, and copies of the monitoring data at reasonable intervals. The Forest Service and GFW will define “reasonable intervals” based on the timing and frequency of data collection, once we know the timing and frequency.
- In addition, GFW requests that the District explain which burns on the District are being monitored at the plant species level and which burns are not (e.g., are only the burns within the FLN demo area being monitored at the species level?).
- During the meeting on the 14th, the Forest Service agreed to consider the possibility of monitoring the effects of prescribed fire on amphibians within the FLN demonstration area. The demo area seemed to be particularly appropriate for this type of monitoring. GFW would like to discuss this further.
- The Forest Service agreed to provide to GFW a list of the existing woodland sites on the Chattahoochee that the agency believes are representative woodlands. The two sites mentioned in the meeting were the Glassmine wildfire and a xeric ridge west of Tallulah Dome.
- It is our understanding that future prescribed burning in the Watergauge project area, as identified in the Decision Memo dated July 8, 2009, will be done under the DM for the bog enhancement and the pine thinning. Any future burning within the larger Watergauge prescribed burn area (DM 2002) will be conducted under that 2002 decision.
- We will all engage in further discussion and field inspection regarding the woodland creation project that the Forest Service wishes to propose and decide on next year.

Finally, now that we better understand the proposal for treating non-native invasive species (NNIS) in this project area, we have several comments on that topic.

The DM should describe the District’s plan for NNIS control. It is our understanding that, before other project activities occur, the Forest Service intends, if there is funding for it, to inventory NNIS within the bog enhancement and pine thinning project area and to treat existing NNIS, to reduce the potential for NNIS expansion following ground disturbance and opening of the canopy. We support and encourage this pre-project inventory and treatment of NNIS.

We believe that most NNIS treatment, including with herbicide, is contracted out. NNIS control should be carried out by properly trained personnel who are adequately supervised by Forest Service staff, to ensure treatment is effective, cautious and narrowly targeted at NNIS (avoiding native species). Herbicide-treated areas should be posted for 24-48 hours after treatment.

We believe the District will require logging equipment to be washed before it enters the Forest. The DM should document this and any other measures to avoid spread of NNIS.

It is our understanding that, after thinning, the District periodically will inspect for NNIS. The DM should specify when inspections will occur. We request that the pre- and post- thinning inventories/inspections include mapping and quantifying NNIS, so that the NNIS response to thinning and the effectiveness of pre- and post- thinning NNIS treatment can be assessed.

We further understand that the District will treat NNIS after thinning only if there are sufficient KV funds (unlikely at current timber prices) and if such NNIS treatment is consistent with the type of work and priorities set forth in the district-wide Decision Notice and FONSI for Vegetation Control: NNIS and Shortleaf Pine Restoration Release (5/6/2008). This approach makes it quite uncertain whether post-thinning NNIS treatment will occur at all. We want to take this opportunity to share two concerns with this approach.

First, regarding funding, the Forest Service should proceed with actions likely to cause an increase in NNIS, such as the proposed pine thinning, only if the agency is committed to treating any increased NNIS and has the funds to follow through on that commitment. The challenge of treating even existing NNIS is enormous and NNIS spread fast enough on their own; it is critical that the Forest Service not make the NNIS problem worse. We view the treatment of NNIS as an essential mitigation measure for the thinning project, not as an add-on or optional treatment. Funds for NNIS treatment should be secured or, at a minimum, NNIS control should be the top priority in the KV plan, immediately after the standard, mandatory KV treatments and before the prescribed burn. The burn cannot occur for several years and can be implemented with other funds, such as fuel reduction funds, while NNIS should be treated immediately after thinning. If post-thinning NNIS control is uncertain, the Forest Service should seriously consider whether it wishes to proceed with thinning in the vicinity of the bog (a rare community) and in or near restoration prescription 9.H.

Second, regarding the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process for this project, the categorical exclusion (CE) the District plans to use for the bog enhancement and the pine thinning, "category 6," does not allow the use of herbicide. See 36 C.F.R. § 220.6(e)(6) ("Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction."). Yet the District plans to use KV funds generated from the sale of timber authorized under this categorical exclusion to herbicide NNIS after thinning. The District plans to rely on the district-wide NNIS decision to authorize the herbicide treatment, but this will make it uncertain whether post-thinning NNIS control will occur at all, because it will depend on where this project falls in relation to other priorities around the district, per the district-wide NNIS decision.³

To be clear, we support the bog enhancement, pine thinning and NNIS control, so we do not wish to pose an obstacle to that work. Rather, we raise this to highlight the importance of

³ The bog enhancement does not fit well within category 6, either. The Forest Service's stated purpose of the bog enhancement is to benefit the bog's plants and hydrology, not to improve any timber stand or wildlife habitat. While it may have some incidental wildlife benefits, the bog enhancement clearly is rare plant-oriented.

understanding and adhering to the parameters of the CE categories in the future. Preparing an EA from the beginning can avoid the troublesome issues and complications caused by attempting to force-fit a project into a CE category.

In conclusion, please let me know if we have misunderstood any of these points or if you have any concerns or questions. We look forward to reviewing a draft of the Decision Memo for the bog enhancement and pine thinning (including a map of proposed activities within the bog's riparian corridor) and to further information and discussions regarding the various topics discussed above. Thank you for your consideration and willingness to discuss these projects with us and to work towards areas of agreement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sarah A. Francisco". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sarah A. Francisco
Senior Attorney

cc: George Bain, Forest Supervisor