



File Code: 1950/2600

Date: November 3, 2008

Dear Interested Forest Stakeholder:

My staff and I are proposing to create and maintain open pine – oak woodland habitat conditions within the “Watergauge Road” area, located on the Chattooga River Ranger District in Rabun County, GA.

Summary of the Proposal

The Watergauge Woodland Project lies within the southeastern portion of Rabun County, GA, within the landtype association (LTA), Tallulah Foothills LTA, described as being “transitional from the Southern Appalachian Piedmont Section to the Blue Ridge Mountain Section.” Site specific plant and animal surveys, along with individual “stand exams” have provided data which shows that the Watergauge project would be an ideal area to work toward achieving several of the plant, animal and habitat goals and objectives described in the Forest Plan.

The Watergauge Woodland project primarily consists of three parts:

- 1). Woodland creation via mechanical treatments (commercial thinnings) on approximately 508 acres;
- 2). Woodland creation and maintenance via rotational prescribed fire on approximately 1,000 acres;
- 3). Mountain bog enhancement via mechanical treatments on approximately 10 acres.

In addition, the following activities may also be implemented within the project area, depending on the level of KV receipts generated from the sale of wood products cut during the mechanical woodland treatments. These activities include:

- 1). Hemlock Woolly Adelgid Treatments;
- 2). Non-native Invasive Plant Species Treatments;
- 3). Soil and Water Restoration Treatments;
- 4). Barricading illegal ATV trails.

All proposed treatments included in this proposal lie within the 1,000 acre prescribed fire boundary.

This project area was identified as being appropriate for woodland restoration treatments for the following reasons: 1) woodlands are a desired habitat for several declining woodland obligate avian species such as the Pine Warbler (MIS), Prairie Warbler (MIS), Field Sparrow (MIS), Northern Bobwhite (Species of Concern), Brown-headed Nuthatch (Species of Concern) and the Eastern Wood Pewee (Species of Concern), 2) the landscape within the Watergauge area is one



that is ecologically suitable for pine / oak woodland habitat, 3) the project area has a history of prescribed fire, which has already started to “move” the area toward the desired future condition, 4) several “woodland” obligate or “dry” site plants have been found within the project area, and 5) the site is within a “demonstration area” on the district where several state, Federal and NGO partners are working hard to achieve mutual biodiversity goals, including the restoration of woodland conditions. Partners which are collaborating on this proposal include: The Nature Conservancy of GA, SC and NC, the GA DNR (Game, Non-game and State Parks) and the Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance (GPCA).

The primary purpose of this proposal is to improve habitat conditions for the above mentioned plants and animals by creating and maintaining a mosaic of pine / oak “woodland” conditions. In addition, a naturally occurring mountain bog would also be enhanced; with the primary purpose being to increase the herbaceous diversity within these state-rare habitats.

For the purposes of this proposal, the desired future condition (DFC) for woodlands is defined as follows: Open stands of trees at least 6 m (20 feet) tall, with crowns often not interlocking; tree canopy discontinuous (often clumped), averaging between 66 and 40% overall cover (at 40% the average diameter of a tree crown equals the average distance between crowns); shrub layer often poorly developed or present only in gaps in the canopy. (*Source:*<http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>). The DFC for mountain bogs, which has primarily been determined by cooperators with the GPCA, has been described as an open, boggy area, with thick mats of sphagnum, grasses and other interesting herbaceous species. Ultimately, the rule of thumb for mountain bog restoration is to remove the majority of shrubs within the wetted surface in order to allow the majority of the day’s sunlight to penetrate the bog area.

Historically, lightning fires and Native American burning were primarily responsible for creating and maintaining woodland conditions, and, to a lesser extent, open, boggy conditions. Currently, woodlands in the mountains and piedmont (and mountain bogs) are becoming increasingly rare due primarily to land use changes and fire suppression.

In this project, woodlands would be created by commercially thinning identified stands to achieve a tree canopy averaging between 40 – 66% of overall cover. Therefore, the number of trees retained in any given area in order to achieve the desired residual canopy cover would depend on the size (diameter at breast height) and species of trees selected for retention. In this project, the largest diameter shortleaf pine and oaks would be prioritized for retention while white pine, loblolly pine, red maple and tulip poplar would be prioritized for removal. The following table (Table 1) contains more specific information relative to the stands proposed for woodland creation.

Table 1.

Comp. / Stand	Age	Overstory Description	Acreage
62 / 19	31	Planted to White Pine, some yellow pine and oak present	119
62 / 27	37	Planted to White Pine, some yellow pine and oak present	37
67 / 02	29	Planted to Shortleaf Pine, some oaks, mesophytic hardwoods and white pine also present	92
67 / 03	40	Planted to Shortleaf Pine, but mostly invaded with Virginia pine	10
67 / 05	27	Shortleaf Pine plantation	27
67 / 21	80	Mixed White Pine, Yellow Pine, Oaks and other hardwoods	31
67 / 24	80	Mixed White Pine, Yellow Pine, Oaks and other hardwoods	70
67 / 29	80	Mixed White Pine, Yellow Pine, Oaks and other hardwoods	58
67 / 30	80	Mixed White Pine, Yellow Pine, Oaks and other hardwoods	31
67 / 36	17	Shortleaf Pine plantation	33
Total =			508

After woodlands have been created, a 3-5 year prescribed fire rotation would be used to maintain the desired woodland vegetative structure and composition. In recent years, two prescribed burn units have encompassed all of the stands proposed for woodland creation (see map 1). Although burning is effective in maintaining an open grass-forb layer by killing woody sprouts, it is not usually severe enough to remove the midstory and open up the overstory canopy. Therefore, a combination of prescribed fire and thinning would be necessary to create and maintain the desired woodland habitat which is described in this proposal. Figure 1 illustrates substantial progress toward the desired future condition of the woodlands which would be created as a result of this proposal. This stand, which is located near the GA Mountain Orchard, was recently thinned to a woodland structure and followed up by a prescribed burn in 2007. A continued 3-5 year prescribed fire rotation is planned to continually maintain this open structure while eliminating woody sprouts and promoting herbaceous establishment.

Figure 1.



Current Management Direction

All of the stands proposed for woodland creation and maintenance are either within Forest Plan Management Prescription 9.H – Management, Maintenance and Restoration of Plant Associations to their Ecological Potential (400 ac. or 40% of project area) or prescription 8.A.1 – Mix of Successional Forest Habitats. However, Forest Plan Management Prescription 11 – Riparian Corridors – is also embedded within both prescriptions, and will not be treated mechanically as part of this proposal. This project would meet the purpose of both prescriptions

by restoring historical plant associations and their ecological dynamics to ecologically appropriate locations. This project would also meet several general goals and objectives of the Forest Plan which include Goal 2 to “provide a diversity of habitat for the full range of native and other desired species”, Goal 3 to “enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types” and Goal 7 to “manage forest ecosystems to maintain or restore composition, structure and function within desired ranges of variability.”

All applicable mitigation would be carried out as detailed in the Forest Plan and the Best Management Practices for Georgia. Some selected important mitigation measures for this project include the following:

- ❖ Water control structures necessary for the control of surface water movement resulting from skid trails or bladed control lines would be constructed within 30 days of completion of the activity (Standard FW-066, FW-205).
- ❖ Re-vegetation of bare soil created by skid trails or control lines for thinning and prescribed burning would be completed to a minimum of 85% coverage within the first growing season following the completion of project activity (FW-068, FW-197).
- ❖ The prescribed burns would be conducted with full adherence to Forest Service internal guidance for air quality and pollution control methodologies prescribed by air quality regulatory agencies.
- ❖ High and intermediate canopy stream shade would be maintained within the riparian corridor (Standard FW-201) during these treatments. This corridor is defined on page 3-175 of the Forest Plan. Within this corridor, only hand lines would be constructed for the prescribed burning treatments (Standards 11-033 and 11-032).

I would like to hear from you regarding this project before making my decision. It appears this project would fall under the following Categorical Exclusion in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 “*Environmental Policy and Procedures*” Section 31.2 - Category 6, Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction. This project complies with this category in that it would benefit wildlife habitat and it would not require any herbicide application or low standard road construction. This project would require the development of a Decision Memo and project file.

This determination, however, will not be finalized until after consideration of your comments and concerns. My staff may also use your comments to modify the specific methods described in the proposal.

This project is a starting point for discussion and analysis and no decision has been made. Responses from the local community, interested individuals and groups, other government agencies, and Forest Service employees are needed to help determine the extent of analysis so we meet the intent of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Comments received help us to develop viable options to the proposal, and/or indicate additional mitigation and monitoring measures needed. Please note that you will be sent further correspondence on this proposed project *only* if you comment on it or if you request further correspondence.

Please make your responses as specific as possible so that we can be sure they are adequately addressed. This would include the following information:

- 1) Your name and address.
- 2) Title of the Proposed Action.
- 3) Specific substantive comments (215.2) on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision.
- 4) Your signature or other means of identification verification. For organizations, a signature or other means of identification verification must be provided for the individual authorized to represent your organization.

Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after publication of this notice in the Northeast Georgian Newspaper. Send your written comments to the Chattooga River Ranger District office at the address given on the letterhead. You may also comment by phone (see letterhead), e-mail to Mike Brod (mbrod@fs.fed.us) or in person at our office in Clayton, Georgia. Phone or hand-delivered comments may be made at the Ranger District office within the normal weekday business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. In accordance with regulations, all written comments received, including those submitted electronically, will be placed in the project file and will become a matter of public record.

This letter is being sent to organizations and individuals who have previously participated or been interested in our project proposals. This letter assumes that you have some familiarity with the planning process as conducted by the Forest Service in accordance with NEPA. If you are receiving this letter and are unsure of the context or how to participate, please contact Mike Brod at the Chattooga River Ranger District office (address and phone on letterhead). Management of the National Forest is a public trust and is best conducted with broad participation.

Thank you for your interest and involvement.

Sincerely,

/s/: David W. Jensen
DAVID W. JENSEN
District Ranger

Enclosure: Map of Project Locations.