

Chattooga River Ranger District – Watergauge II Open Woodland Project update

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In the fall of 2008 the Chattooga District issued a Scoping Notice to solicit comments from the public on a proposal that entailed 508 acres of “open oak-pine woodland restoration”. The agency attempted to use a Categorical Exclusion (CE) for the original project to exempt it from detailed environmental impact analysis. After discussions with our partner at the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), GFW and SELC determined that the project as initially proposed did not meet the criteria for a categorical exclusion, SELC filed a legal appeal of the project on behalf of GFW. The goal of the appeal was to have the agency to take a closer look at the finer details of the project in a full Environmental Assessment. CE’s are typically used for small, routine, and non-controversial proposals such as replacing toilets, maintaining small areas of forest infrastructure, salvage harvest of small patches of damaged trees, thinning pine trees for forest health purposes on a small scale, etc. We felt that creating woodlands and savannahs in the mountains of North Georgia is a relatively new idea that should be viewed as “experimental” and subject to detailed monitoring and evaluation.

After filing the appeal, ForestWatch met with the district personnel and an appeal resolution was reached. Through this process the District committed to proceeding under a CE for some of the work in the original Watergauge I project, which included thinning 318 acres of overly dense pine stands for the prevention of Southern Pine Beetle and conducting mountain bog restoration on less than 7 acres of bottom land within the original project area. The District also agreed to conduct a full Environmental Assessment for the remaining acres of the Watergauge I area targeted for woodland creation.

Because ForestWatch felt that some areas of the original project were unsuitable for woodland/savannah management and more conducive to closed canopy forest, the District invited us to collaboratively identify other areas in the vicinity which we believed were more suitable for maintaining a more “open” forest condition. ForestWatch worked in the office and in the field to identify alternatives to the original Watergauge I project. An area of uplands near Rocky Mountain was identified as potentially suitable for woodland maintenance. ForestWatch selected

this area due to the parent geology, soil type, forest community types, drainage, site productivity index rank, slope, aspect, etc. The Rocky Mountain site has a significant component of shortleaf and pitch pine as well as many dry oak forest species. In addition to that criteria we are working from the basic premise that if managers are looking to manage for “open” woodland/upland forest types, they should seek to identify sites that are most conducive to producing such open forests without needing frequent fires. It should be acknowledged that upland forest types, due to their dry nature do benefit from occasional fire, as many of the species associated

with the upland communities are also fire associates. Areas of the Rocky Mountain site already have a more “open” and stunted forest character without management.

Woodland restoration on the Chattahoochee has become synonymous with identifying a mature second growth forest that has the presence of some plants that require partial sunlight and removing 40 to 60 percent of the forest canopy to allow sunlight to reach the forest floor. Following the timbering, the area is burned on a 3 to 5 year schedule using prescribed fire. ForestWatch has insisted that the Forest Service take a closer look at the criteria used to identify forest stands suitable for “woodland” restoration. The District is currently working on the Environmental Assessment for this project, which will receive the same close review that the first proposal received. ■

