

Plan Revision Meeting on Vegetation Management

November 13 – Verona (6:30 – 9:00)

December 3 – Lexington (6:30 – 9:00)

Vegetation management includes timber harvest, prescribed fire, wildfire suppression, and wildlife habitat improvements. Also included in this discussion are the related topics of old growth, special biological areas and non-native invasive species. Management of vegetation is the primary means by which we can manage plant and animal communities.

Timber Harvest

Public concerns about the amount of timber harvest, location of harvest areas and methods of harvest were issues in the current plan and remain important issues today. In the 1993 plan the forest identified about one-third of the forest as suitable for timber harvest. Timber harvest has been at a much lower level than identified in the Forest Plan.

We would like to hear more discussion about the role of timber harvest, the level of harvest desired and the location of timber harvest on the forest.

Habitat Management

The Forest Plan sought to:

- 1) Provide large, unfragmented blocks of forested land, mostly in later successional stages. These areas were located in a manner that provided opportunities for the movement of plants and animals.
- 2) Provide habitat for species benefiting from early successional vegetation. Basically, this early successional habitat was to be located in timber harvest units (0-10 age class), wildlife clearings, utility rights-of-way, and in some prescribed burn areas.

The Management Areas designated to provide large blocks of relatively unfragmented forested areas have not changed. Based on the results of monitoring data and habitat evaluation, ovenbird and worm-eating warblers exhibit stable to increasing population trends on the GW, as well as state-wide and region-wide, indicating sufficient maintenance of desired condition relative to forest interior habitats.

While permanent early successional habitat in the form of open land, field, and old farm habitat has stayed relatively stable, timber harvesting has declined and acreage treated has decreased from about 3,000 acres per year in 1993 to about 800. Concerns have been expressed by our state wildlife partner agencies, wildlife advocacy groups, bird conservation groups and others about the reduction in early successional habitat.

The use of timber harvest and prescribed fire in wildlife management is another discussion area.

Fire Management

An important need for change is the recognition of the role and extent that fire historically played in shaping Appalachian ecosystems and the myriad of plant and animal species they support. Recent research across the GWJNF using dendochronology and fire-scarred trees show that from the early 1700's until the 1930's 75% of fires occurred in areas dominated by yellow pine, yellow pine-oak, and oak-yellow pine at a lower and upper level of 1 – 9 years. These were typically low intensity understory fires but more intense stand replacement fires occurred approximately 75 to 100 years, likely during times of very dry fuel conditions. Fires occurring at approximately this level of frequency would shift what is now a closed canopy, dense midstory forest with numerous shade tolerant and fire-intolerant trees such as red maple and white pine towards a more open woodland with many canopy gaps and an open midstory and favor trees, shrubs and grasses such as oaks, blueberries, huckleberries, and bluestems that are adapted to increased levels of sunlight. Open woodlands supported many plants and animals now rare or of public interest such as table mountain pine, golden-wing warblers, turkeys, blueberries, and whitetail deer.

We are proposing to expand the prescribed fire program on the forest. We have heard comments in favor of this expansion and some concerns about the level of treatment that we are proposing.

Special Biologic Areas

These areas include lands that support key components and concentrations of the Forest's biological diversity. They typically include high quality natural communities such as high elevation mountain tops, shale barrens, caves and karst features, wetlands, and habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive (TES) species.

Currently the plan has about 69,000 acres of land identified as special biological areas. An additional 6,100 acres of the Laurel Fork Special Management area is also identified as special biologic area. In our Comprehensive Evaluation Report we have identified an additional 49,000 acres of land to be added.

Old Growth

Fundamentally, little true old growth exists on the GWNF. The reason the GW exists today is because these lands were lands nobody wanted because they had been exploited for iron, and bark to burn in tanneries during the 1800s. Thus, most of this land had been harvested at least one time. However, there are stands where enough older trees are present to identify them as old growth.

No plant or animal species in the Appalachians are known to require old growth forest conditions exclusively (i.e. are “old growth obligates”) for their survival or continued existence.

The number of acres reaching the minimum age to be considered old growth is increasing annually as the forest ages. An important point is that the age at which old growth conditions

develop varies by forest type. Minimum ages vary from 80 years for the drier pine dominated types to 180 for the more mesic cove types. From 1993 to 2005 total older forest acreage increased by 94,763 acres.

Currently the Forest Plan states that timber harvesting in stands identified as old growth can only occur within the Dry Mesic Oak Type, as all other forest type stands meeting the minimum age were classified during the Forest Plan revision process as unsuitable for timber production.

Questions being considered in the revision include allowing additional forest types to be considered for harvest and what type of analysis should be done before harvesting trees in any of the old growth types that could be allowed.

Non-Native Invasive Species

The spread of non-native invasive species is a concern across the forest. The measures to use to control these plants and management practices to prevent their spread are considerations in the revision.

Guidelines and Monitoring Needs

Guidelines are used to provide direction for implementing the plan. We need to find out if there are specific guidelines regarding vegetation management that would improve implementation of the plan. We also need to hear if people have any ideas on aspects of vegetation management that need to be monitored during plan implementation.

Meeting Purpose

- Discuss vegetation management on the Forest
- Discuss options for any needed changes in desired conditions, suitability, objectives, and guidelines regarding vegetation management

Meeting Format

1. 20 minute presentation on vegetation management
2. Break into groups of 5-15 people for discussion of the question (below).
3. 5 minute break
4. Break into different groups to discuss other areas
5. Repeat groups
5. Get back together for a brief recap.

Small Group Sessions

Each table will have: 1) maps of the districts showing current management, potential wilderness areas; 2) a summary of comments heard to date; and 3) a place to record comments.

Questions for Small Group Discussion:

- 1) **What is important to you about managing vegetation on the Forest?**

Comments We've Heard at the Public Workshops related to Vegetation Management

November 5, 2008

Prescribed Fire

- Prescribed fire is important tool for forest health and vegetation management
- Some prescribed burning is needed but need strict requirements where it is allowed; no burning in moist, cove areas
- No prescribed burns at all, let natural fires burn
- Prescribed burning should carefully consider all research on historic fire regimes, the regimes are longer that originally thought
- Use fire for oak regeneration
- Smaller areas for prescribed burning

Wildlife

- Incorporate the goals and objectives of state, regional and national wildlife plans and directives. GW is the largest public landholding in the State of VA and critical to help achieve many of the goals identified in these collaborative plans. Plans include Virginia's 2006-2015 Draft Deer Management Plan, Virginia's 2001 Bear Management Plan, Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan, Partners in Flight Conservation Plan, Mid-Atlantic Ridge and Valley (MARV) Plan and the Southern National Forest's Migratory and Resident Landbird Conservation Strategy.
- The primary objective for wildlife is for the species of greatest conservation need (priority species in the Va Wildlife Action Plan), the second objective is for species for recreational opportunities. More balanced age classes: 3-5% herbaceous, 10-15% early successional, 15-20% young 10-40 yrs old, 50-60% in mast producing 40-120 yrs, 10-15% in late/old. Diverse forest species composition important to wildlife for hard and soft mast (Am chestnut, acorns, grapes, berries), control/eradication of invasive species (ailanthus and privet), reverse on-going conversion from shade-intolerant, fire-tolerant species (oak, hickory, yellow pine) to shade-tolerant, fire-intolerant species (white pine, maple, beech). Create more early successional habitat - less than 1% of the forest is 10 years or younger, while 3% is less than 20 years old, affecting many wildlife species that require this habitat are in serious decline (Am woodcock, yellow-breasted chat, golden-winged warbler, prairie warbler, chestnut-sided warbler, etc). DFC should have at least 10-15% in early successional habitat. Allow timber harvesting on more acres - 93 Plan reduced land available for commercial timber harvest (primary method for creation of wildlife habitat) from 640,000 acres to 333,000 acres. 93 Plan level was 3,000 acres per year for timber harvesting while actual harvest levels are about 800 ac per year, resulting in substantial reduction in early successional habitat. New Plan should have 4,000 - 5,000 ac per year for harvesting. All acres within MAs 14, 15, 16, 17 and 22 should be available for timber harvesting, prescribed burning and other habitat manipulation techniques, which would equate to 600,000 acres (57%) of the forest truly available for wildlife habitat mgmt.

- A balance for the forest should be to create and maintain forest age classes: 1) 5% herbaceous grass/forbs; 2) 10% early successional; 3) 15% young aged 10-40 years old; 4) 60% mast producing habitat aged 40-120 years old; and 5) 10% old growth. This cannot be done with the current and proposed wilderness areas. All acreage within the general wildlife habitat designations should be available for timber harvest, prescribed burning and active wildlife management. Need to incorporate new research findings into the revision: the Cooperative Alleghany Bear Study, Appalachian Cooperative Grouse Research Project, Turkey Dynamics Study, Turkey Gobbler Study and numerous songbird studies.
- It is bad wildlife management to disperse management activity over too large of an area when the financial resources are adequate to only meet half of key habitat objectives, would be better to fully meet objectives in smaller areas.
- Stop generalizing wildlife and develop species-specific strategies not only for major game species but for most of the other fauna
- Open road densities should be determined by biological concerns and the needs for hunter access.
- Cooperate with the Va Dept of Game and Inland Fisheries to meet habitat goals in Virginia's 2006-2015 Deer Management Plan, 2001 Bear Management Plan and Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan.
- More grouse habitat with small to moderate size clearcuts, not group selection (around 2 acre openings); grouse are declining
- More concern for non-game wildlife
- Retain MA 14 areas with equal or stronger prescriptions – important for black bear and other species in remote settings
- Need more open woodland habitat
- Strictly protect wood turtle populations and protect with a research natural area or special biological area for the best sites.
- Early succession habitat wildlife species are suffering greatly because of the over-aged forests (ruffed grouse, American woodcock, bobwhite quail were very common on the forest 30 years ago). Early successional habitat needs to be spread across the broader forest, not isolated in small exclusive areas.
- Large blocks of geriatric forest are wildlife wastelands with little food and cover, no small blocks of grass and forbs, early successional habitat. The Bird Conservancy and the National Audubon Society both have named loss of early successional Eastern deciduous forest as one of the most threatened bird habitats. These birds include the American woodcock, yellow-breasted chat, golden-winged warbler, prairie warbler and chestnut-sided warbler). The National Wild Turkey Federation has determined that early successional habitat is critical for the recruitment of turkeys.

Vegetation

- Establish objectives for old growth in areas other than wilderness
- Do not cut any more old growth since inventory is not adequate to know how much we really have
- More MA 16 (Early Successional Habitat) areas

- More timber harvesting because the forest is aging quicker than cutting and the older stands are dominating the age class distribution; harvest what is planned for - actual harvest is much less than the approved 1993 plan level
- Harvesting is good for the local economy
- Decrease timber sales because it competes with the private landowner
- Timber harvesting leads to improved wildlife habitat; especially when spatially and temporally dispersed
- Remove the suitable timber land from the MA 14 areas within inventoried roadless areas
- Keep suitability for timber harvest on perimeter of areas but not in the interior
- Continue timber harvesting in areas already managed and stay out of unmanaged areas
- Identify additional land with low quality, poor site indices that may need to be harvested for wood chips to go into future fuel in alcohol production
- Don't mix good timber with low grade timber in sale packaging; keep roads at lowest standard needed
- Concern for wildfires because of the buildup of undergrowth over time in unmanaged forests.
- Need to allow selected timber cutting and prescribed burns to be better stewards of the land. A report commissioned by the Forest Service and conducted by the Pinchot Institute in Nov, 2007 said that the Forest Service has not cut enough trees. In all cases, harvest did not reach levels necessary to achieve a future condition reflecting their social, economic and ecological goals.
- We need to cut more timber for different uses, including wildlife, if done right and using Best Management Practices. Cutting more timber would have an economic benefit from the timber cutter down to sawmill workers and would help some areas that are economically depressed. We need to cut mature trees before they die.
- Harvesting timber is an important practice on the forest, perhaps some of the very large cuts 30 years ago were not good but carefully planned projects are suggested to help our area economically and are great for wildlife.

Forest Health

- Forest Health is a top priority and requires the use of appropriate tools, such as prescribed fire, timber harvesting and management of invasive species
- Invasive species – need to be aggressive, Forest Service has the chance to be leader in identification and control
- Concern over gypsy moth population explosions and impacts to timber and wildlife habitat
- Forest health doesn't necessarily mean human intervention

NORTH RIVER RANGER DISTRICT

Vegetation Management

- North side of Rt 33 up to Hardy/Rockingham county lines – more timber harvest and herbaceous openings for wildlife management
- More early successional habitat in MA 14 and MA 4 around Switzer Dam
- More timber and vegetation management in the MA 14 and 15 areas near Beech Lick Knob, along State Route 818
- WV side of Shenandoah Mtn next to Skidmore – maintain early successional habitat
- Burn New Road area and western Shenandoah county for regrowth
- Support the use of prescribed burns, increase areas of wildlife habitat and food plots
- More early successional habitat to benefit wildlife, 10-15 percent of total area and stick to the plan
- Increase the age class distribution, create more early successional habitat
- More timber management in the MA 15 and 14 areas on the north side of Rt 33 on the suitable timber land
- More timber management in the MA 15 area west of Dry River roadless area and south of Brandywine recreation area
- Limit timber harvesting the MA 13 area east of Ramseys Draft to provide a corridor between contiguous areas
- The MA 14 areas between Benson Run and Signal Knob Corps are remote habitats and should be unsuitable for timber
- Large (10-25 acre) cuts for grouse habitat needed in Little River roadless area, MA 15 and MA 13 around Todd Lake and MA 15 around Braley Pond

Wildlife

- Re-establish elk population in the Shenandoah Crest Zone
- More stringent protection for the Cow Knob Salamander in Shenandoah Crest area; remove OHV roads in the area; expand the area with new research on the Cow Knob salamander range
- More grouse habitat needed, especially in Churchville area
- Rockingham County Deer Hunter Association maintains some wildlife openings in the Beech Lick Knob area

LEE RANGER DISTRICT

Vegetation

- More timber harvesting and management needed, more early successional habitat
- Lot of white pine beetle infestation in MA 9 area near Tomahawk Pond, along the Rockingham and Hardy county lines
- Need habitat diversity in Big Schloss and Southern Massanutten roadless areas, allow even-aged cutting along the perimeter for early successional habitat, i.e. grouse habitat

- More selective cutting in MA 17, less clearcutting
- Lot of invasive species at the north end of the Lee District

Wildlife

- Good bald and golden eagle habitat in the MA 15 area around Lost River/Kimsey Run
- Continue to manage for bear habitat in MA 14 on Southern Massanutten Mtn southeast of New Market
- Change the MA 14 that adjoins MA 9 near Tomahawk Pond at the Rockingham and Hardy county line to continue the MA 9 up along the ridge top – why does it stop at the county line?
- Several good locations for wood turtle habitat
- Big Schloss area – The National Wild Turkey Federation maintains some wildlife openings; Wilson Cove Deer Study Area in the Wardensville Wildlife Mgmt Area in Hardy Co, WV (Paddy Mtn end)
- Jerkentight area - Highlands Wildlife Management Area located in the northwestern part

JAMES RIVER RANGER DISTRICT

Vegetation Management

- Salvage gypsy moth damage on the southern end of the district

WARM SPRINGS RANGER DISTRICT

Vegetation Management

- Clearcuts along Route 125 (west of Douthat State Park) for grouse habitat and along Rt 624 above Bath Alum and in the MA 15 area above Hidden Valley Campground
- MA 14 area north of Route 84 (Big Ridge) – continue timber management and early successional habitat for ecological restoration because oak is not coming back
- Large blocks along Warm Springs Mountain are part of the Fire Learning Network and scheduled for prescribed fire in cooperation with The Nature Conservancy

PEDLAR RANGER DISTRICT

Vegetation

- The Pedlar district is located in an active industrial forestry area, timber harvesting important for local economy
- Need more early successional habitat on the district