United States
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Forest
Service

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Environmental Assessment

Visitor Information Areas

Apalachicola and Wakulla Ranger Districts, Apalachicola National Forest
Leon, Liberty, Franklin and Wakulla Counties

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SUMMARY

The Apalachicola National Forest (ANF) proposes to construct 17 Visitor Information Areas (VIA's) at strategic entry points throughout the Forest. The project area includes primary and secondary roads between the Apalachicola National Forest and its urban interfaces. This action is needed to provide visitors useful information to assist them in having a safe and enjoyable experience while using their National Forest.

The proposed action may remove approximately 10 acres from growing forest vegetation, but sites have been located to avoid potential impacts with heritage, water and threatened and endangered resources. Sites have been selected in natural openings to reduce the number of trees being removed.

In addition to the proposed action, the Forest Service also evaluated the following alternatives:

- *No Action*

Based upon the effects of the alternatives, the responsible official will decide to construct these Visitor Information Areas around the Apalachicola National Forest over a period of 3-5 years or not construct these areas and provide the public with the information through other means.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Forest visitors arrive on the National Forest with a set of expectations and currently there is little to provide them with a sense of arrival, maps and information to refine their itinerary, or an overview of rules and regulations. Visitors can receive information about forest attractions and rules at two ranger stations and a few developed recreation areas spread across 580,000 acres, but these are not readily convenient for most visitors. Smaller signs posted around the forest—which detract from natural aesthetics—get frequently removed by humans or natural occurrences further inhibiting visitors from receiving up-to-date information which hinders the enforcement of forest regulations.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this initiative is to provide forest visitors with information and orientation to the ANF. Currently the ANF does not provide adequate forest entry information other than signs saying "Apalachicola National Forest". This action is needed as a critical communication tool for forest visitors in urban interface locations and strategic portal entry points, providing visitors with forest rules of conduct and other necessary visitor information. This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the National Forests in Florida Forest Plan and helps move the project area towards desired future conditions (DFCs) described in that plan: expansion and enhancement of recreation

opportunities (Forestwide DFC #12, pg. 2-3; Forestwide Goal #1, 3). [Forestwide Standard and Guidelines pg. 3-12 Law Enforcement goal is to inform all national forest users of applicable laws and regulations.]

Proposed Action

The action proposed by the Forest Service to meet the purpose and need is to construct wayside pull-offs with minimal parking and signage. Construction would consist of semi-hardened surfaced pull-through semi-circular drives with an additional lane for temporary parallel parking and accessibility to signs providing information on "Things to Know," "Places to Go," and "Things to Do".

Decision Framework

Given the purpose and need, the deciding official reviews the proposed action and the other alternative in order to make the following decisions:

- Which alternative best meets the purpose and need for the proposal?
- How does each alternative address the issue identified by the interdisciplinary team and through public involvement?
- Which alternative or combination of alternatives will be implemented?

The deciding official may decide to take no action at this time.

Public Involvement

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on January 2008. A public scoping letter was mailed to the Forest mailing list on March 4, 2009. The proposal and draft Environmental Assessment is being provided to the public and other agencies for comment during the scoping period of April 29 – May 29, 2009.

Issues

Locations were selected to avoid potential impacts with biological, archaeological, social and visual resources. One public comment was received from the initial scoping letter that was mailed out on March 4, 2009. A summary of that comment is included in Appendix A.

ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

This chapter describes the alternatives considered for the Visitor Information Areas project. It includes a description and map of each alternative considered.

Alternatives

Alternative 1

No Action

Under the No Action alternative, no construction of Visitor Information sites would be implemented. Visitor information would be provided through existing means.

Alternative 2

The Proposed Action

The Apalachicola National Forest is proposing to site and construct up to 17 VIA's with visitor information, rules and regulations at key entry points to the Forest. Small parking areas (1-3 spaces) will be provided.

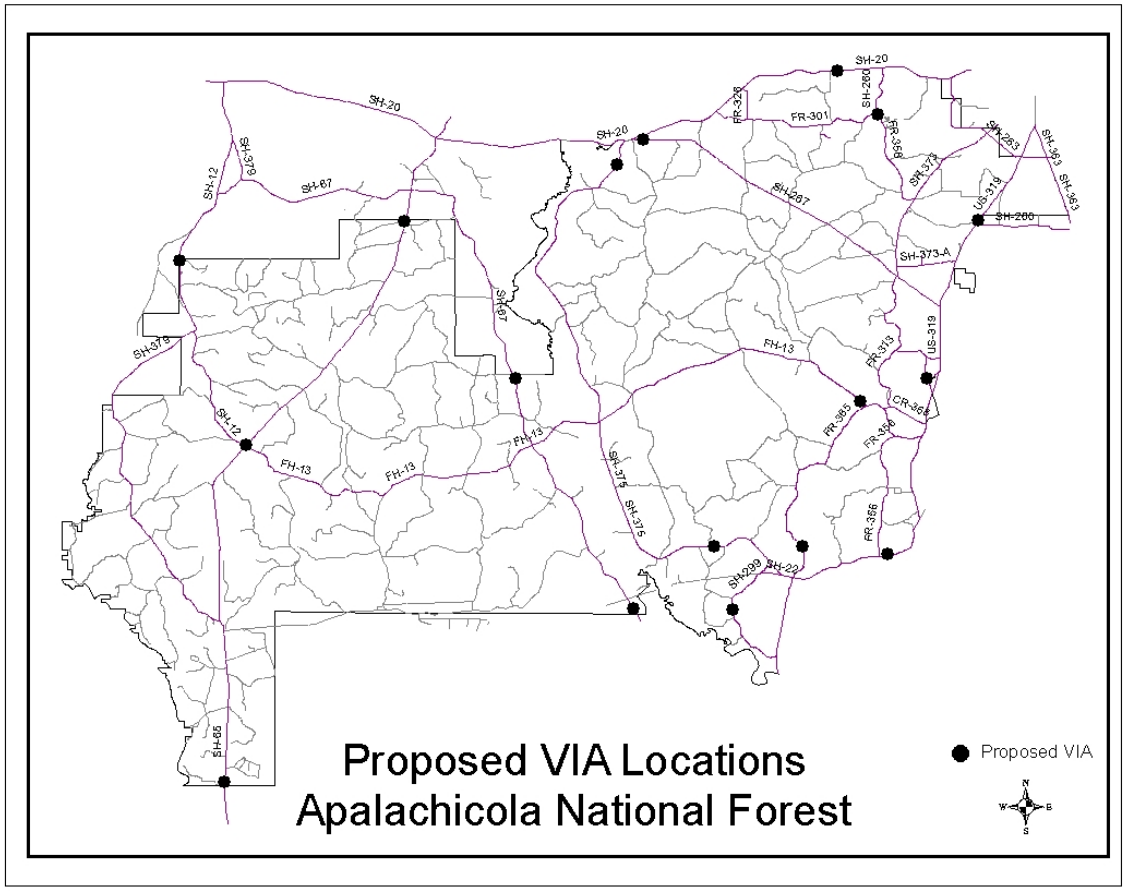

Figure 1. Proposed Visitor Information Areas.

Mitigation Common to All Alternatives

There are no mitigation measures needed for the project because areas have been designed to reduce resource impacts.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

Locations were selected to avoid potential impacts with the physical environment including the biological, archaeological, social, economic and visual resources. Concurrence for the proposed project was documented in the Biological Evaluation and Heritage Resource Report.

Physical Environment

Soil disturbance will be temporary during initial construction and proposed sites have been located to avoid any low lying areas and steep slopes so erosion will not occur. Water quality will not be affected as there are no proposed sites located adjacent to a water body.

Biological Environment

The Biological Evaluation documented that the proposed construction is a very low risk project because of its small size and low probability of affecting species listed by the USFWS as threatened. The project as proposed will have No Effect on any USFWS listed threatened or endangered species and may impact individual sensitive species but is not likely to cause a trend to federal listing. Aster eryngiifolius was the only sensitive plant observed at the time of survey, as only limited suitable habitat was present. The majority of the proposed sites no longer contain national forest characteristics largely due to previous disturbances and/or regular mowing activities.

Social Environment and Economics

The management summary for Heritage Resources recommended that all proposed sites proceed with only one specific recommendation for the proposed site along FH-13 in Wakulla County. It included the recommendation to proceed with the proposed activity while interpreting a well preserved turpentine catface tree with attached gutter tins.

All proposed sites were selected to blend into the natural environment. The visual resource disturbance is minimal, because all sites will not be urbanized by pavement or large parking areas. A few of the proposed sites along the major US Highways or State Roads may one day receive pavement if there is a joint venture with FDOT or Federal Highways during highway improvements or expansions. The proposed hard surfacing would primarily consist of compacted limerock roadbase.

It is assumed that recreational impacts and resource damage would be lowered because the proposed VIA's would give clear instructions to the public of "What to Know" while visiting your national forest. For example, it is assumed that motorized use violations and

impacts would decrease because proposed signage would define proper use of national forest lands and direct the visitor where they can legally enjoy their specific recreational activity.

The economic impacts of the proposed project would inject a small amount of money into the local economy for a short period of time. The proposed construction would possibly need local contractors to purchase and haul the roadbase materials, construct driveways with installing culverts, concrete the mitered ends of the culverts and other minor construction items. The sign materials would most likely be contracted to someone who normally produces final sign products for the Forest Service who would be on a GSA contract. Estimated cost of construction compared to the No Action alternative could be as much as $9000 per proposed site. Costs also depend upon how much construction the Forest Service does itself on the proposed sites.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

The Forest Service consulted the following individuals, Federal, State, and local agencies, tribes and non-Forest Service persons during the development of this environmental assessment:

ID TEAM MEMBERS:

Shanon Harvey, Landscape Architect, Apalachicola National Forest

Andrea Repp, Archaeologist, Apalachicola National Forest

Louise Kirn, Botanist, Apalachicola National Forest

Garth Smelser, Deputy District Ranger

FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL AGENCIES:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

State Historic Preservation Office

OTHERS:

Consultant Gary Hegg, Silviculturalist & NEPA Coordinator, Apalachicola National Forest

Consultant Chandra Roberts, Forester, Apalachicola National Forest

Consultant Cathy Briggs, Recreation Program Manager, Apalachicola National Forest

Consultant Patrick Lovejoy, Engineering Technician, Apalachicola National Forest

APPENDIX A

Public Comment Summary – Visitor Information Areas

This document shows the comments we received from the public in response to our scoping efforts and how those comments were addressed in the final decision document.

Public Scoping Announcements and Dates

Scoping Document	Date of Document	End of Comment Period	Comments Received
Initial scoping legal notice	March 4, 2009	March 20, 2009	1
Schedule of Proposed Actions	January 2008	N/A	
Pre-decision Draft EA Review	April 29, 2009	May 29, 2009	
Decision Notice/FONSI			

Listed below are the issues generated from the public scoping requests and how they were addressed in the EA.

Date Rec. Standing?	Who Commented	Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities	How Were the Comments Addressed?
April 1 (2009) Yes	Brett Paben - Wildlaw	Supports proposal. Would like to not have areas paved if possible.	Proposed project includes hard surfacing of limerock road base materials for most all sites. Any paving would occur when FDOT or Federal Highways does road improvements to State or US Highways only.