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Environmental Assessment

Bice Road

**Wakulla Ranger District, Apalachicola National Forest
Leon County, Florida**

Section 31, T1S, R1W of the Tallahassee Meridian

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SUMMARY

The Apalachicola National Forest proposes to initiate a proposal from Leon County for a public road easement and to apply surface improvements (Open Graded Cold Mix) to approximately 0.26-mile section of FDR 317 (Bice road). The project area is located Section 31 of Township 1 South and Range 1 West, Wakulla Ranger District of the Apalachicola National Forest in Florida. This action is needed to respond to a special use request from Leon County Board of Commissioners.

Due to the limited scope of the project, potential effects of the proposed action are relatively limited in nature. Potential effects include an increase in speed of vehicular traffic and subsequently the frequency and severity of accidents.

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

- *No Action*

Based upon the effects of the alternatives, the responsible official will decide whether or not to issue a road easement to Leon County Board of Commissioners to construct, operate, and maintain a small section of Bice Road.

INTRODUCTION

Document Structure

The Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This Environmental Assessment discloses the direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action and alternatives.

Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of project-area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at the Wakulla Ranger District Office in Crawfordville, Florida.

Background

Leon County has requested to pave a 0.26 portion of Bice Road, located south of E.W. Reeves Road, to provide better access for its citizens, minimize erosion, and to reduce maintenance activities. If road paving is approved a road easement would be issued to Leon County Board of Commissioners to construct, operate, and maintain a paved road. Currently this road is maintained by Leon County under a cooperative road maintenance agreement because there are citizens that live along the road.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose of this initiative is to respond to a request from the Leon County Board of Commissioners. This action is needed to improve the road leading to private residences and to reduce road maintenance costs for Leon County. This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Florida (Forest Plan).

The following Forestwide Goals from the 1999 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan apply to this project:

1. Ensure a philosophy of service is paramount in our relationship with the public in the management of forest resources.
2. Be aggressive and innovative in providing for public participation in planning, managing, and monitoring of the national forests.
3. Strengthen partnerships and actively pursue communication, cooperation, and partnerships with other national forests, other agencies, groups, local communities, organizations, and tribal governments to serve the public interest, consistent with the Forest Service Mission.
4. Meet regularly and often with county commissioners, congressional staff, tribal governments, and State agency directors to ensure a high level of positive communication needed to maintain national forests for quality public uses and values.
5. Contribute to the social and economic well-being of local communities by promoting sustainable use of renewable natural resources and participating in efforts to devise creative solutions for economic health.

The following Forestwide Objectives from the 1999 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan apply to this project:

1. Ensure innovative and aggressive public involvement in national forest management by developing partnership documents with other national forests and public groups and with local, State, and other Federal agencies, and tribal governments.

Proposed Action _____

The Apalachicola National Forest proposes to initiate a proposal from Leon County for a public road easement and to apply surface improvements (Open Graded Cold Mix) to approximately 0.26-mile section of FDR 317 (Bice road). The project area is located Section 31 of Township 1 South and Range 1 West, Wakulla Ranger District of the Apalachicola National Forest in Florida.

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:

Whether or not to issue a road easement to Leon County Board of County Commissioners to construct, operate, and maintain a paved road.

Public Involvement

The proposal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions each quarter since July 2009. On October 25, 2009 an initial scoping letter was mailed to individuals on the District NEPA mailing list. Two responses were received.

Using the comments from the public, other agencies, and federally recognized tribes (see *Issues* section), the interdisciplinary team developed a list of issues to address.

Issues

The Forest Service separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. Non-significant issues were identified as those: 1) outside the scope of the proposed action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; or 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) NEPA regulations require this delineation in Sec. 1501.7, "...identify and eliminate from detailed study the issues which are not significant or which have been covered by prior environmental review (Sec. 1506.3)..."

Based on comment review, and evaluation of the Proposed Action, no significant issues were identified. Non-significant issues have been addressed as described in the following table.

TABLE 1. ISSUES GENERATED BY PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Significant	Issue	Reason
No	There may be increased vehicular speed which could result in an increase in frequency and severity of traffic accidents.	There are few houses located in this area. Paving (Alternate 2) is not expected to measurably increase traffic or speed in the area since the road is mainly used by people living along the road.
No	There may be increased mortality of mammals, birds, amphibians and reptiles attracted to the radiant heat of the road which is used to regulate body temperature.	Alternative 2 is not expected to measurably increase vehicular traffic. Also, under Alternative 2, much of the existing canopy along the road would remain intact; Thus, minimizing the amount of radiant heat which might attract amphibians and reptiles.
No	There may be an increase in erosion from storm water runoff that might impact local residences.	Alternative 2 would utilize permeable pavement which would reduce storm water runoff. Ditches would be placed on the side owned by the Forest Service which would ease erosion and flooding concerns for private landowners.

No	Residents owning land along road may lose acreage because of paving project.	Neither alternative would occupy additional private land.
No	Road construction may negatively impact threatened and endangered species from loss of habitat.	The biological evaluation states that Alternative 2 “is not likely to adversely affect” any threatened and endangered plants or animals.
No	Oil spills from refueling stations, leaks from above-ground tanks, and seepage from underground storage and or fuel/tanks may contaminate the environment.	Alternate 2 would pave a quarter mile section of road which limits risk of potential spills. Special Use Permit restrictions would provide guidance on proper storage of oil and gas during construction.

ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING THE PROPOSED ACTION

This chapter describes and compares the alternatives considered for this project. It includes a description and map of each alternative considered. This section also presents the alternatives in comparative form, sharply defining the differences between each alternative and providing a clear basis for choice among options by the decision maker and the public. Some of the information used to compare the alternatives is based upon the design of the alternative (i.e., helicopter logging versus the use of skid trails) and some of the information is based upon the environmental, social and economic effects of implementing each alternative (i.e., the amount of erosion or cost of helicopter logging versus skidding).

Alternatives

Alternative 1

No Action

Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. Bice Road would remain a sand clay surfaced road and would require periodic grading to keep it passable to the public.

Alternative 2

The Proposed Action

The Apalachicola National Forest proposes to move forward on a proposal from Leon County for a public road easement and to apply surface improvements (Open Graded Cold Mix) to approximately 0.26-mile section of FDR 317 (Bice road). The project area is located Section 31 of Township 1 South and Range 1 West, Wakulla Ranger District of

the Apalachicola National Forest in Florida. This action is needed to respond to a special use request from Leon County Board of Commissioners.

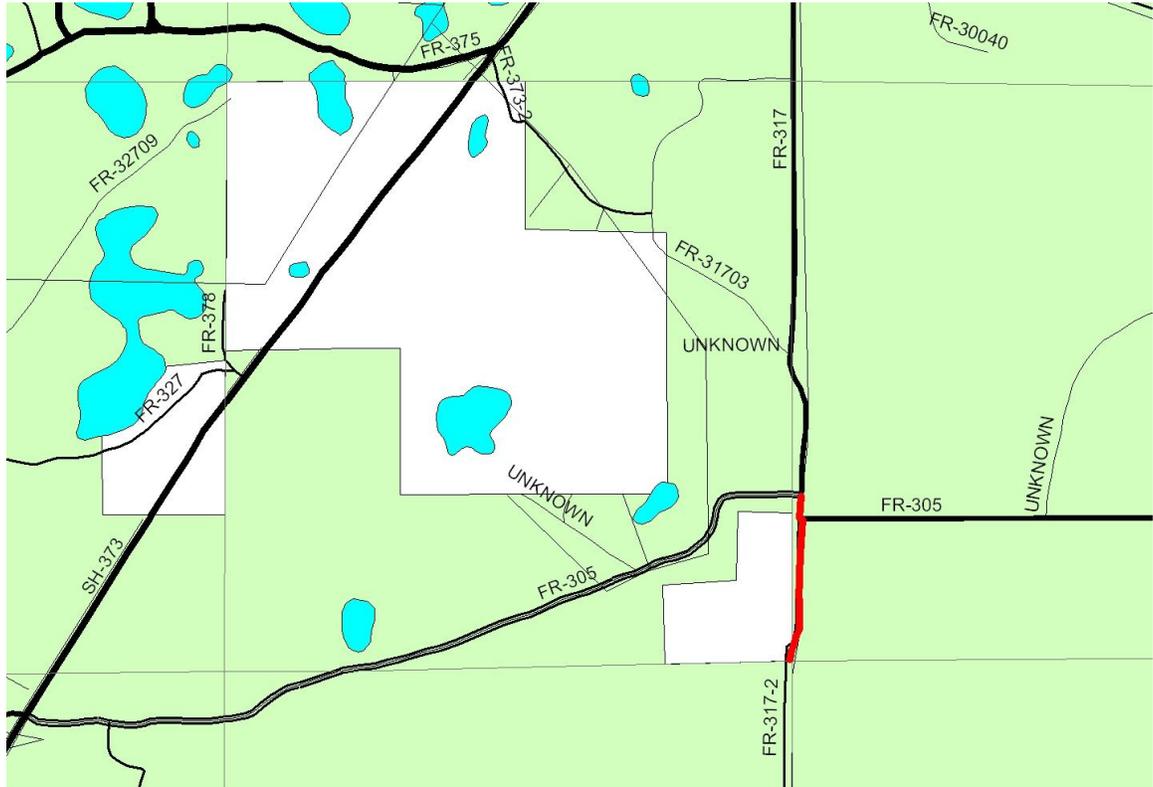


Figure 1. Alternative 2 - Road Paving.

Mitigation

The Proposed Action was designed to eliminate any special mitigation needs.

Comparison of Alternatives

This section provides a summary of the effects of implementing each alternative. Information in the table is focused on activities and effects where different levels of effects or outputs can be distinguished quantitatively or qualitatively among alternatives.

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES BY ALTERNATIVE

Affected Environment	Alternative 1 - No Action	Alternative 2 – Proposed Action
Air Quality	No change – Some dust would be produced during dry times from vehicle movement and road maintenance.	There would be a short-term increase in dust and vehicle exhaust during construction, There would be a long-term improvement by reducing dust from vehicle traffic and road maintenance.
Soils	Some soil would be lost through surface run-off during storm events.	The porous pavement proposed for use acts like a sponge absorbing water, reducing the amount of surface soil that runs off into ditches and then into wetland areas.
Water	Some soil would contribute to run-off from maintenance operations. The road would	The road would be constructed of permeable pavement, absorbing runoff and preventing excessive erosion during major storm events. Oil

Affected Environment	Alternative 1 - No Action	Alternative 2 – Proposed Action
	continue to flood after heavy rain events.	spills could occur but the relatively small area under consideration for Alternate 2 and permit restrictions would minimize risk of spills.
Vegetation	No Change	Some shrubs and a few trees would be removed along the road shoulders and through ditch work up to a maximum of 10ft feet on side owned by Forest Service. Existing overstory tree canopy along the road would remain largely intact.
Wildlife	No Change	Increased traffic speed and type of road surface may increase the chance that wildlife would be hit by moving vehicles. To combat the likelihood that certain species would be affected, existing canopy along road would remain largely intact.
PETS Plant and Animal Species	No Change	The Biological Evaluation determined that Alternative 2 is not likely to adversely affect any threatened or endangered species. For Sensitive species, the BE determined that the proposed action may impact individuals but not likely to cause a trend to federal listing or a loss of viability.
MIS Plant or Animal Species	No Change	Because of the size, location, and intensity of this project no management indicator species for Plants or animals were selected
Visual Quality	No Change	Visual quality may be slightly enhanced by reduced dust on roadside vegetation.
Recreation	No Change	There would be no measurable change to recreation opportunities since the area is currently surrounded by open roads. Increased traffic speed into forest could reduce the recreational experience along this road for hunting, bird watching and wildlife viewing
Cultural Resources	No Change	There were no Cultural or Historic sites to be avoided.
Economics	No Change	Property owners in the area could experience an increase in value due to better accessibility. Leon County would likely have some reduction in maintenance costs.
Transportation System	Better to unload bulldozers for fighting wildfires without damaging the paved surface.	Reconstructing and paving 0.26 miles of road would improve the road surface condition, improving transportation for people living along road and those who use it. Pavement surface should endure the weight of fire or logging equipment. A paved surface would make it more difficult to unload a bulldozer in case of a wildfire.
Public Safety	Dusty conditions during dry weather could reduce visibility.	Public safety would improve during dry times because less dust obstructing vision of drivers. Increased traffic speed could lead to increased severity of accidents.

Affected Environment	Alternative 1 - No Action	Alternative 2 – Proposed Action
Environmental Justice	No Change	No Change

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This section summarizes the physical, biological, social and economic environments of the affected project area and the potential changes to those environments due to implementation of the alternatives. It also presents the scientific and analytical basis for comparison of alternatives presented in the chart above.

Physical Resources

Air Quality

The air quality of this area is generally good. There are no processing plants or other air pollution plants close to the analysis area.

Alternative 1 - No change – Some dust will be produced during dry times from vehicle movement and road maintenance.

Alternative 2 – There would be a temporary decrease in air quality during road reconstruction operations if it were dry. There would be a long-term improvement by reducing dust from vehicle traffic and road maintenance.

Soils

According to soils section in the biological evaluation, the soils along this road are known as Alpin sands. These soils do not cause any limitations for road construction.

Alternative 1 – No change – Soil may be lost through runoff during major storm events.

Alternative 2 – The use of permeable pavement instead of traditional asphalt reduces storm water runoff. The material proposed for paving is very absorbent and is expected to reduce sedimentation.

Water

Alternative 1 – Some soil would contribute to run-off from maintenance operations.

Alternative 2 - Temporary increases in turbidity during reshaping of back slopes and ditches, especially after major storm events. Banks along road would be limited to 1:1 or flatter slope. Grass would be planted along banks. The use of permeable pavement would absorb runoff and lesson the effects of erosion. Flooding issues on private land would be addressed by the construction of ditches on Forest Service land and angling the road to divert water away from private holdings.

Oil spills could occur but the damage to the environment would likely be limited because of the small project area and should not result in any cumulative impact. Under this

alternative, a storm water plan would be created by Leon County and would have to be complied with if the proposal is implemented.

Cumulative Effects on Physical Resources

Alternative 1 - It is not anticipated that the no action alternative would have a cumulative effect on these resources.

Alternative 2 - No other effects from past, present, or future projects have been identified which when combined with this project might result in a cumulative effect.

Biological Resources

Vegetation

Under both alternatives, all roadwork would remain within the existing right-of-way.

Alternative 1 – Vegetation along Bice Road would not be impacted.

Alternative 2 – Some shrubs and a few trees would be removed along the road shoulders and through ditch work up to a maximum of 10 ft on side owned by Forest Service. Existing overstory tree canopy along the road would remain largely intact.

Wildlife

Surrounding private lands and existing roads have already caused forest fragmentation, which affects the quality of the forested habitat for some wildlife. Because of this existing fragmentation large terrestrial wildlife species such as black bear and deer probably do not frequent the area. However, other species such as the Gopher tortoise may utilize the grassy habitat provided by mowing the utility rights-of-way.

Alternative 1 – This alternative is not expected to have an affect on Wildlife.

Alternative 2 - Paving Bice Road could increase traffic speed, potentially causing more mortality of animals crossing the road. Leaving existing canopy along proposal area would help avert reptile mortality stemming from their attraction to the radiant heat held by paved surfaces.

Proposed, Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive Plants and Animals Species

Alternative 1 – This alternative is not expected to have any effects to PETS species.

Alternative 2 - A biological evaluation was completed for this project. The Biological Evaluation determined that Alternative 2 is not likely to adversely affect any threatened or endangered species. For Sensitive species, the BE determined that the proposed action may impact individuals but not likely to cause a trend to federal listing or a loss of viability.

Management Indicator Species (Plants and Animals)

Because of the size, location, and intensity of this project no management indicator species for Plants or animals were selected.

Cumulative Effects on Biological Resources

Alternative 1 - It is not anticipated that the no action alternative would have a cumulative effect on these resources.

Alternative 2 - No other effects from past, present, or future projects have been identified which when combined with this project might result in a cumulative effect.

Social or Economic Resources _____

Visual Quality

The proposed project location is near Springhill Road, a major throughway on the National Forest.

Alternative 1 – No change in visual quality of the area would occur under this alternative.

Alternative 2 – There would be no immediate change in the visual quality of the area. Long-term, less dust would cover the vegetation along the roadside during dry times.

Cultural Resources

There are no known cultural or historical resources along the section of road proposed for paving. The area affected by this proposal has been surveyed for these resources and none were found. Therefore, none of the alternatives would have a measurable affect on cultural resources.

Recreation

Hunters use this area to access the forest and visitors could use the area for birding and wildlife viewing.

Alternative 1 – No change.

Alternative 2 - Increased traffic speed into forest could reduce the recreational experience along this road for hunting, bird watching and wildlife viewing.

Economics

Currently this road is being maintained by Leon County under a cooperative road maintenance agreement. The county is spending money to grade the road for the school bus, residences, and people that use it. Also, there is a concern that landowners will lose acreage.

Alternative 1 – The current situation would continue. There would be no change to the economics of the area. Private property lines would not be impacted.

Alternative 2 - The initial investment of paving the road would be paid for by citizens of Leon County. Paving would be a long-term investment because it would reduce maintenance costs over time, negating the initial paving cost. Paving this road would not be an economic benefit to the National Forest. Residents owning property along project area would not lose acreage if project was implemented. Property owners in the area could experience an increase in value due to better accessibility. Leon County would likely have some reduction in maintenance costs.

Transportation System

Forest Road 317 provides access into the forest east of Springhill Road.

Alternative 1 – Under the no action alternative everything would remain the same.

Alternative 2 - Reconstructing and paving 0.26 miles of road would improve the road surface condition and increase the traffic speed.

Paving this portion of Bice Road should minimally impact the traffic pattern of the area.

A paved surface would make it more difficult to unload a bulldozer in case of a wildfire.

Increased traffic speeds may make it more difficult for logging equipment to enter the road from adjacent forest roads. The proposed pavement surface should be able to accommodate heavy duty trucks and should not become a barrier for timber harvesting operations.

Public Safety

Bice Road is maintained by Leon County. Safety issues caused by the condition of the road are limited visibility caused by dust during dry periods and flooding after heavy rains.

Alternative 1 – This alternative will not improve the dusty road condition during dry weather nor would it cure flooding after rain events. The current conditions would remain the same.

Alternative 2 - This alternative would improve visibility along the road during dry weather. Paving this section would reduce the amount of dust in the air following the movement of vehicular traffic. Improved visibility would reduce the likelihood of a vehicular accident. However, if vehicular speeds increase due to paving, the severity of accidents could be heightened. Ditching along the road will reduce flooding of houses located adjacent to road.

Environmental Justice

It is not anticipated that either alternative would have an affect on civil rights of people in or around this project area. This project would be carried out by Leon County and would be mandated by state law to insure there is no discrimination in the solicitation of contractors and their laborers.

Cumulative Effects on Social Economic Resources

Alternative 1 - It is not anticipated that the no action alternative would have a cumulative effect on these resources.

Alternative 2 - No other effects from past, present, or future projects have been identified which when combined with this project might result in a cumulative effect.

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:

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Appendix A
Public Involvement

