



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Apalachicola Ranger District
P.O. Box 579
Bristol, FL 32321
850/643-2282

Wakulla Ranger District
57 Taff Drive
Crawfordville, FL 32327
850/926-3561

File Code: 1950

Date: December 16, 2009

Dear Forest Users and Interested Public:

The Forest Service is pleased to announce the availability of the Environmental Assessment (EA) of the Gopher Tortoise Habitat Improvement project for a 30-day Notice and Comment period. The EA is available by request or on the internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/florida>.

This proposal would authorize the treatment of mid- and understory hardwood vegetation with herbicides and hand tools on existing and potential gopher tortoise habitat. Existing and potential habitat is determined by soil drainage class. Those areas with a drainage class of Excessively Drained, Somewhat Excessively Drained, Well Drained or Moderately Well Drained are all considered to offer habitat but only if the vegetation has a sparse over- and midstory and an abundance and diversity of herbaceous groundcover. There are areas on the Forest with the appropriate soils but the existing vegetation precludes gopher tortoise use. Hardwood tree and shrub encroachment has resulted in shading and reduction of the herbaceous component. The Forest Service would like to manage those areas with suitable soils to maintain and/or repatriate tortoises on them. In order to do this the present unnatural density of hardwoods and shrubs must be reduced. The Apalachicola National Forest received grant money from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for this project.

Many areas on the Forest with suitable soils already offer appropriate habitat for gopher tortoises as the result of effective prescribed burning. However, due to previous owners or other past circumstances that led to hardwood encroachment there are still some areas needing additional management techniques applied, such as herbicide, in order to achieve the desired future condition. Before treatment all identified priority acres would be mapped. The kind of herbicide that would be used on those acres would be determined depending on the type and current condition of the vegetation. A pesticide use proposal would be completed for each area. Any circumstance that requires special considerations, including but not limited to the proximity of private land, water or wetlands, and threatened or endangered species would be recorded and mitigation implemented. Treatment areas would be separated by time and space. There are two alternatives for this proposal: the Proposed Action, and the No Action. No other alternatives were developed.

The current priority areas being considered are: the Black Creek Tract and stands to the west up to State Route 375, (T2S, R4W, Sec 13, 18, Leon County), 2000 acres in the Munson Sandhills, (T2S, R1W, Sec 6, 7 and T2S, R2W, Sec 1, Leon County), and the Bradwell Game Farm, (T1S, R4W, Sec 19, 20, 30 and T1S, R5W, Sec 24, 25, Liberty County). All acreages are preliminary estimates. As the project goes through time and funding is available other priority acres with suitable soils would be identified and treated.

The herbicide application would be managed by a Forest Service employee that is a Certified Pesticide Applicator and also certified to oversee contracts. Selective methods



would be used and could include: directed foliar spray, stem injection, basal spray, cut-surface treatment, and soil spot treatments. No broadcast, aerial, or aquatic applications would be involved. Herbicides being considered for use include hexazinone, glyphosate, imazapyr, and triclopyr. Once the herbicide has achieved the desired conditions (more than one treatment may be needed), prescribed fire would be used for maintenance and further improvement.

Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.5, the District Ranger is seeking comments on this proposal. Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day following the publication of the legal notice in the *Tallahassee Democrat* and the *Calhoun-Liberty Journal*. Your comments need to be as specific as possible and contain the following:

- (1) Name, address, and (if possible) telephone number;
- (2) Title of the proposal on which comment is being submitted; and
- (3) Specific facts or comments along with supporting reasons that you believe the Responsible Official should consider in reaching the decision.

Comments received in response to this notice, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Written comments on this proposal should be sent to: District Ranger, 57 Taff Drive, Crawfordville, FL 32327, called in at (850) 643-2282, or faxed at (850) 643-2284. Oral or hand-delivered comments must be received within our normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday and 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM on Friday, closed on federal holidays. Comments may also be mailed electronically in a common digital format to our office at comments-southern-florida-apalachicola@fs.fed.us

To obtain additional information about this proposal, contact Susan Fitzgerald at (850) 643-2282 extension 1531 or sfitzgerald@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

MARCUS A. BEARD
District Ranger