

DECISION NOTICE  
&  
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

PALS Project #22520  
**Betsey Branch Analysis Area**  
**Compartments 310 and Related Areas**

USDA Forest Service  
Wakulla Ranger District, Apalachicola National Forest  
T4S, R4W and T5S, R3W  
Wakulla County, Florida

**BACKGROUND**

Betsey Branch falls in Management Area (MA) 7.1, predominately longleaf and slash pine forest that is managed with a focus on an adaptive approach in maintaining or restoring ecosystem health. The analysis area consists of Compartment 310 and related areas, totaling 6,134 acres. Betsey Branch was identified on the National Forest's Five-year Action Plan. It is located on the west side of the Wakulla Ranger District (WRD) of the Apalachicola National Forest (ANF). Initial analysis indicated that opportunities for improvement existed in this analysis area. An interdisciplinary team was formed to begin detailed review of the Forest Service proposal. The purpose of this initiative is in response to the *National Forests in Florida* Land and Resource Management Plan.

**DECISION**

Based upon my review of the Environmental Assessment (EA), I have decided to implement Alternative A, with modifications. The modifications to Alternative A are: 1) Exclusion of the eastern portion of Compartment 310: stand 49 to protect cultural resources, and 2) the deferral of all actions in stands 2, 125, and 126 of Compartment 310, including the associated firebreaks and roadwork, until archeological clearance. Actions in these areas are pending on findings of archeological survey and/or evaluation. The Archeologist's recommendations shall be followed without delay. Modifications to the chosen alternative will be reflected in the Silvicultural Prescription, a document used for implementation on the ground. Pen-and-ink changes will be applied to Betsey Branch EA.

Actions connected to the proposed action will include approximately 8.2 miles of road maintainance and 5.2 mile of reconstruction to erosion sites; 3.5 miles of landline maintainance and 3.5 miles of firebreak along the Forest boundary; 0.5 mile of road to decommission. See the following tables for detailed information.

**Table 1: Alternative A – Modified Proposed Action**

Treatment	Comp	Stand	Acre	Forest Type	Cond Class	Age Year	Basal Area (BA)
Row-Thin	310	25	29	22	11	1984	86
	310	32	70	22	11	1969	91
	310	33	70	22	11	1984	96
	310	49*	55	22	11	1984	100
	310	50	31	22	11	1984	77
	310	74	9	22	11	1984	93
	310	75	32	22	11	1984	110
	312	1	38	22	11	1967	66
	312	5	17	22	11	1975	82
	312	7	55	22	11	1975	87
	313	31	11	22	11	1973	118
Group Selection	310	31	51	21	10	1916	75
	310	54	15	21	12	1932	70
	310	72	14	21	10	1916	62
Thin-from-Below	310	2†	115	22	10	1943	71
	310	10	141	22	11	1967	65
	310	48	18	21	10	1932	72
	310	51	15	21	11	1974	70
	310	60	39	22	11	1948	66
	312	6	19	22	11	1935	75
Clearcut	310	4	34	22	9	1975	71
	310	8‡	8	22	11	1970	64
	310	82	36	13	11	1960	25
	310	125§	13	22	9	1967	81
Mechanical/Manual Site Prep or Hardwood Reduction	310	8	8	22	11	1970	64
	310	13	8	22	11	1967	62
	310	59	15	22	9	1967	40
Herbicide Site Prep or Release	310	4	34	22	9	1975	71
	310	8	8	22	11	1970	64
	310	11	40	21	13	1994	N/A
	310	80	10	31	11	1960	45
	310	82	36	13	11	1960	25
	310	125	13	22	9	1967	81

\* Stand 49 (C310) will be a partial stand treatment for resource protection. Consult Archeologist prior to timber stand layout.

† Suspend all actions in Stand 2 (C310) until further notice from the District Archeologist. Follow the pending recommendations.

‡ Instead of herbicide and groundcover restoration, stand 8 will include mechanical site prep and herbicide release for pine seedlings.

§ Suspend all actions in stand 125 (C310) until further notice from the District Archeologist. Follow the pending recommendations.

Treatment	Comp	Stand	Acre	Forest Type	Cond Class	Age Year	Basal Area (BA)
Hand-Plant Longleaf	310	4	34	22	9	1975	71
	310	8	8	22	11	1970	64
	310	59	77	22	9	1967	40
	310	82	36	13	11	1960	25
	310	125**	13	22	9	1967	81
Rehab Plowed Line or Groundcover Restoration	310	4	34	22	9	1975	71
	310	9	2	22	12	1938	N/A
	310	82	36	31	13	1960	43
	310	125	13	22	9	1967	81
Prescribed Burn for Brown Spot Disease	310	4	34	22	9	1975	N/A
	310	8	8	22	11	1970	N/A
	310	13	8	22	11	1967	N/A
	310	59	77	22	9	1967	N/A
	310	82	36	31	13	1960	N/A
	310	125	13	22	9	1967	N/A
Designated Firewood Areas	310	80	10	31	11	1960	N/A
	310	82	36	31	13	1960	N/A
Designated Helispot	310	126 <sup>††</sup>	4	0	0	0	N/A

Quantities are estimates based on preliminary measurements. Actual quantities will be determined during sale layout.

Grand Total in MBF (conversion factor CCF x 0.55) = 2,337 MBF

**Table 2: Connected and/or Additional Actions**

Action	Location/Area	Miles
Road Maintenance	Compartment 310: Forest Roads (FR) 309, 314, 355, 355-B, 309-J,	8.5
Road Reconstruction	Compartment 310: FR 355-D, 314-I, 309-L, 309-K, 309-P, 314-P, 355-C, 314-H	5.2
Repair Erosion	Compartment 310: 309-P and 314-I	0.25
Create 25' Firebreak	Compartment 310: Stands 33, 36, 49, 51, 75, 82, 94, 125	3.5
Landline Maintenance	Compartment 310: Stands 2, 33, 35, 49, 51, 64, 67, 68, 75, 79, 82, 94, 125	3.5
Decommission Road	Compartment 310: Stand 59 (FR 314-P)	0.25

Quantities are estimates based on preliminary measurements. Actual quantities will be determined during implementation.

\*\* Defer all actions in this stand until the Archeologist complete survey. Follow the pending recommendation.

†† Defer all actions until the Archeologist completes survey. Follow the pending recommendation.

## REASONS FOR DECISION

When compared to the Prescribed Burn (B) and No Action (C) Alternatives, this alternative will best meet the purpose and need for action within this analysis area. The modified Alternative will treat approximately 1,126 acres of southern pine forestland to improve threatened, endangered, and sensitive (TES) species habitat; forest health and sustainability; wildland-urban interface conditions; soil productivity; and public safety within and surrounding the Betsey Branch Analysis Area. These actions will move the analysis closer to the desired future conditions for Management Area 7.1 (pp 4-39 – 4-40) and contribute to the forestwide goals and objectives (pp 2-1 – 2-7) set forth in the *Revised Land and Resource Management (Forest) Plan for the National Forests in Florida*.

Alternative A, modified meets the goals and objectives of the RLRMP (2-3 thru 2-7), moves the Forest toward the desired future condition (2-1 thru 4-54), is responsive to issues specific to the compartments and stands, and complies with the standards and guidelines of the RLRMP (3-1 thru 4-54) and specifically Management Area 7.1 (4-37 thru 4-42).

Implementation of this decision is expected to occur within the next three to five years.

## COORDINATION MEASURES

Coordination measures were developed to ease some of the potential impacts to the physical, biological, and social-economic environments. The coordination measures may be applied to that of Alternative A.

### Soil & Water

- *In stands 33, 80, and 82 (of Compartment 310), restrict soil compacting activities, including logging traffic – on Bladen, Eureka, Iberia, and Megget soil series when the water table is within 12 inches of the surface, or when soil moisture exceeds the plastic limits.*
- *No operation of heavy equipment would occur during periods when weather conditions and soil conditions would promote excessive rutting or compaction.*
- *A 35-foot Special Management Zone would be required in the following area(s): Compartment 310 - stands 2, 25, 33, 49, 50, 54, 59, 74 and 75.*

### Air Quality

- *No herbicide would be applied within 100 feet of private land or 300 feet of a private residence, unless the landowner agrees to closer treatment.*
- *No herbicides would be applied when wind speed is greater than 8 miles per hour.*

### Vegetation

- *Timber sale, road construction, and site preparation contracts would contain equipment cleaning clauses to prevent the introduction of exotic plants.*
- *The guidelines for planning and applying herbicides contained in the Vegetation Management Environmental Impact Statement would be followed (Veg. Mgmt. FEIS 1989)*

- *An Emergency Spill Plan would be developed to minimize hazards to people and natural resources in the event of an accident.*

#### Proposed, Endangered, Threatened and Sensitive (PETS) Species

- *If modifications are made in the project, or if additional information regarding the effects of the project on listed species becomes available, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) would be notified and informal consultation would be reinitiated if the USFWS for the Forest Service determines it is needed.*
- *Timber and road contracts would prohibit harvest, hauling, and/or roadwork within active Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) clusters during the nesting season, April 1 through July 31. Exceptions would be made for hauling and/or roadwork on major numbered roads and highways.*

#### Heritage Resources

- *Known cultural resource sites would be protected by timber sale contract and no ground disturbing activities would occur in these areas, which may include segments of roads.*
- *If any heritage resources were discovered during operations, all ground-disturbing activities would cease. The Forest Archaeologist would determine changes to be made to the project area to the project before work would resume.*

#### Visual Quality

- *All logging debris within 100 feet of Maintenance Levels 5 and 4, formerly Traffic Service Levels A and B, roads (State Road 375, Forest Road 309 and 314) would be lopped and scattered within 2-feet of the ground.*
- *No herbicide would be applied within 100 feet of private land or 300 feet of a private residence, unless the landowner agrees to closer treatment.*
- *Notice signs (FSH 7109.11) are clearly posted, with special care taken in areas of anticipated visitor use.*

### **OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED**

#### ***Alternative B – Prescribed Burn***

Under this alternative, the proposed treatments would be same as the proposed action with the exception of the use of prescribed burn for site preparation and/or release of longleaf pine seedlings. The existing conditions are evidence that prescribed burn alone has not been effective in several stands within this analysis area.

#### ***Alternative C – No Action***

Under this alternative, only normal operation such as prescribed burning for fuel reduction, recurring road maintenance, and landline maintenance will continue. No commercial harvesting of timber, additional road maintenance or reconstruction, roads decommission longleaf nor groundcover restoration, 4-acre helispot designation, 25-foot firebreaks will occur as a result of this analysis.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

The Forest Service uses the “scoping” process to notify individuals and groups within and outside the organization to obtain comments regarding the proposed and connected actions.

Betsey Branch Proposal was first listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on October 1, 2007. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during initial 14-day scoping on December 28, 2007. Four comments were received as a result of scoping efforts. As part of the public involvement process, the agency posted the draft Environmental Assessment on the Forest Service webpage for a 30-day Notice and Comment Period. A letter, dated January 14, 2009, went out to the interested public on the Apalachicola National Forest public mailing list and adjacent landowners. The letter announced the availability of Betsey Branch Environment Assessment for public comment. The Notice and Comment Period was initiated by posting a legal notice in the *Tallahassee Democrat* on January 16, 2009. Using the comments from the public, other agencies, organizations, and tribal contacts the interdisciplinary team (IDT) developed a list of issues to address.

Internal scoping was accomplished through the interdisciplinary process. Several Interdisciplinary Team (IDT) meetings were held in the spring of 2007 to develop the initial list of issues. Issue statements were developed by the IDT to drive the development of alternatives and to facilitate assessment of those alternatives for implementing the proposed action. Concerns provided by the public and the ID Team are:

1. Potential impact of herbicide application
2. Potential for forest visitors to use the firebreaks to access to the National Forest

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

After considering the environmental effects described in the Environmental Assessment, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. The finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the proposed actions.
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety. The activities prescribed are commonplace forestry activities, which have been utilized many times in the past.
3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area. Visual resource mitigation measures have been put in place to reduce the visual effect of the management actions (EA, pages 41-42).

4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. Because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project (EA, page 48).
5. The Forest Service have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (EA, pages 19-40).
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because these actions are limited in scope and intensity and are also limited to the analysis area.
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant (EA, pages 24, 32, 36 and 40).
8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because the locations for these activities have been surveyed for these unique resources. The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources, because any items of interest found during the surveys have been avoided or mitigation measures have been put in place to avoid impacts to these resources (EA, page 40).
9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. A biological evaluation was completed for plants and animals and the US Fish and Wildlife Service has reviewed those biological evaluations and concurs with the findings (EA, Appendix B).
10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Florida.

### **FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS**

The decision to implement Alternative A, modified, is consistent with the intent of the Forest Plan's forestwide goals and objectives listed on pages 2-3 to 2-7. The project was designed in conformance with the Forest Plan's standards and guidelines for vegetation management, wildlife habitat improvement, heritage resources protection, wildland fire prevention, and road management.

Clearcutting has been determined to be the optimum method of regeneration for stands 4, 8, 80, and 125 in compartment 310. The stand to be regenerated is young slash pine that is "off site" and will be converted to longleaf pine.

## ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.11. Individuals or organizations that submitted substantive comments during the comment period may appeal. Appeals must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. Written appeals, including attachments, shall be sent to: National Forests' in Florida, ATTN: Susan Jeheber-Matthews, Appeals Deciding Officer, 325 John Knox Road, Suite F-100, Tallahassee, Florida 32303-4160. Appeals may be faxed to (850) 523-8504. Hand-delivered appeals must be received within normal business hours of 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday and 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Friday; closed on federal holidays. Appeals may be mailed electronically in a common digital format to [appeals-southern-florida@fs.fed.us](mailto:appeals-southern-florida@fs.fed.us). This legal notice is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal within 45 days of the publication date in the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Those wishing to appeal should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

## IMPLEMENTATION DATE

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 business days following the date of appeal disposition. In the event of multiple appeals of the same decision, the implementation date is controlled by the date of the last appeal disposition.

## CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Chandra Roberts, Forester/NEPA Planner, Wakulla Ranger District, 57 Taff Drive Crawfordville, Florida 32327; or call at (850) 926-3561.

for   
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**MARCUS A. BEARD**  
 District Ranger

4.30.09  
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**Date**

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