

## **Bankhead Liaison Panel**

### **Meeting Summary**

**May 3, 2022**

The Bankhead Liaison Panel met on May 3, 2022 at the First National Bank in Double Springs, Alabama. The following Forest Service staff attended the meeting: Andy Scott, Bankhead District Ranger, Rita Patterson Bankhead Administrative Support Specialist, Jason Harris, Bankhead Silviculturist, Blake Addison, Bankhead Timber Management Assistant, Allison Cochran and Rollins Jolly, Bankhead Wildlife Biologists. The following members of the liaison panel attended the meeting: James Barnacastle, Winston County Smith Lake Advocacy, Mike Henshaw, Alabama Cooperative Extension and Winston County Natural Resources Council, James Alexander, Backcountry Horsemen of Alabama, Kevin Pugh, Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area Biologist, and Randy Feltman, logger and resident. The following people also attended the meeting: Representative Tim Wadsworth, Dr. Nichole Jones Wadsworth, Mike Bagwell, Stephen Haylder, Rutger Hyche, Amy Melson, Damon Parker, Wayne and Patsy White, Kim Waites, Kathy and Michael Perry, Maggie Johnston, Bob Crow, Chris Cole, Katie Tindol, Jimmy Mitchell, and Courtney Boren.

Bankhead District Ranger Andy Scott welcomed the group and provided some background information on the Bankhead Liaison Panel.

National Forests in Alabama Forest Supervisor Cherie Hamilton shared that Ranger Andy Scott is moving to the National Forests in Mississippi as Deputy Forest Supervisor. Cherie Hamilton discussed that she is working on a roadmap for leadership, and she is hoping to have two long-term detailed employees come in as the Acting District Ranger while the process proceeds to replace Andy Scott.

Andy Scott provided some **general updates on the Bankhead National Forest**. Personnel updates include Archaeologist Jean Allan's upcoming retirement, ORA Shane Hoskins move to the Mark Twain National Forest, and several vacant positions currently advertised.

Other Bankhead updates include the Winston County FAWN program planned for May 5 in Arley, the Youth Fishing Derby at the Black Warrior Work Center on June 11, the Southeastern Bat Diversity Network Bat Blitz at Bankhead and Camp McDowell in August which will include a public program about bats on August 1, past and upcoming Renew Our Rivers Smith Lake clean-ups with the Winston County Smith Lake Advocacy and Alabama Power Company, and an October Landowner Field Day being planned near Natural Bridge.

Andy Scott also provided a Bankhead prescribed burning update. We have burned 16,744 acres in Fiscal Year 2022 to date. There are a few site preparation burns still planned for this summer and fall. There are 18,000 acres projected to burn in FY 2023.

Silviculturist Jason Harris shared a presentation on the **Pinetucky Longleaf Woodland Project**. This project was shared at the last meeting. About 5,000 acres are proposed for treatment with a focus on off-site loblolly pine removal and restoration to native forest communities with an emphasis on longleaf pine and wildlife species associated with woodlands and early successional forests. The proposed actions include commercial thinning for woodland restoration; thinning to improve forest health;

converting offsite loblolly by clearcut with reserves; converting stands suitable for hardwood to hardwood by removing loblolly pine; herbicide use for site preparation, midstory, understory and NNIS control; glade and wetland restoration; road management; road closures for selected roads; and erosion control projects to reduce sedimentation. Feedback and input on the project is welcomed by contacting Jason.j.harris at usda.gov.

Comments from Dr. Nicole Jones included questions about road closures that are included in the Pinetucky Project proposal and whether a map would be provided. A map of all proposed treatments, including roads, will be available the Environmental Assessment and shared with the Bankhead mailing list and any interested citizens.

There was a question from Stephen Hadler about herbicide being used near the Sipsey Wilderness Area. The Pinetucky Project is not located near the Wilderness Area. But other non-native invasive species treatments using herbicides are conducted throughout the District and near the Wilderness Area, for example in the Cranal Road area.

Wildlife Biologist Allison Cochran shared a presentation on **Stewardship End Result Contracting**, the **Bankhead Woodlands Stewardship Proposal**, and the plan to offer two Integrated Resource Timber Sale Stewardship Contracts in Fiscal Year 2022. The contracts will include loblolly pine thinnings, manual release and pre-commercial thinning of longleaf and shortleaf pine and herbicide treatment of non-native invasive plants and midstory removal in loblolly woodland stand. An interested bidder field trip is in the planning stages for June.

Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area Biologist Kevin Pugh provided **updates on the WMA** and hunting seasons this year.

New Black Warrior WMA maps were produced this year. A user-friendly smart device application or daily permits were required for use on all WMA's this year, which has helped with reporting. Daily Use Permit boxes were also installed with a goal of capturing everyone who uses the WMA, what they are hunting, etc.

Great deer hunting participation and success this year on the Black Warrior. There were 4,051 recorded man days of deer hunting on WMA. Ninety-eight bucks and 23 does were harvested. Black Warrior deer numbers and statistics are doing well and better than other state WMA's. Michael Perry harvested a 188" deer, the new state muzzleloader record on the Black Warrior this year. Some very large deer were harvested this with 7 deer weighing over 200 pounds. Majority of bucks were also in older age classes than in the past; 65% of bucks harvested were over three years old and 40% were over four years old. Only about 10% of deer harvested this year were a year old. We have a really good age structure for bucks on the WMA.

Turkey numbers are good, as well, so far this year. There are 1,000 man days of turkey hunting recorded on WMA (leading state in WMA turkey harvest numbers). Thirty-nine turkeys have been killed. Statewide the turkey population is in decline.

There were questions about hunting pressure this year. The number of man days is down this year some, compared to the boom associated with Covid and people in the outdoors. A positive comment was shared about the WMA kiosk on the Ridge Road. There was a question about whether there was a good online place with a better visual to find the WMA hunt dates. The outdooralabama.com website

has the permit with hunting seasons and dates. There was a question from Mike Bagwell about the coyote population and whether it was being looked into. No. We don't have great habitat to support a large number of coyotes. Coyotes primarily feed on things like insects, mice and rabbits and we do not have great habitat for those prey, nor coyotes. There was a question from Dr. Nicole Jones about what ADCNR is doing to reach out to women, minorities and non-traditional groups. The Department has active outreach programs to introduce non-traditional hunters to hunting and the outdoors, like Becoming an Outdoor Woman program, mentored hunts, Special Opportunity Areas, and archery in schools.

The Bankhead National Forest also has an online ArcGis Online map of all of the managed wildlife openings on the Bankhead and Black Warrior. Visit the Bankhead website or see one of the biologists to find this free, great map product.

Maggie Johnston and Kim Waites shared updates on Wild Alabama's activities in the Sipsey Wilderness Area, including the **Wilderness Character Monitoring** project. Wild Alabama has four full-time and three part-time employees at this time. Kim Waites (wilderness stewardship coordinator) discussed their active programs, including Wilderness Character Monitoring, Forest Ambassadors, Volunteer Wilderness Rangers, Helping Hands, Water Quality Testing, Leave No Trace Training, Hemlock Monitoring Project, White Oak Acorn Project, and Outreach Hikes.

There was a comment from Randy Feltman on why there is privet removal occurring in the Wilderness Area. Kim Waites answered that the goal of removing non-native invasive plants is to preserve the natural landscape and biodiversity and allow for native plant growth.

There was a comment and concern from Jimmy Mitchell about the white oak planting project and how that might impact the burn rotation of the areas and delay burning. The commenter was not supportive of planting white oak stands at the risk of not prescribed burning areas.

Representative Wadsworth had questions about land exchanges and Forever Wild land being purchased and given access through National Forest system lands for a boat ramp and how land exchanges happen. Representative Wadsworth discussed the limited amount of boat launches in Winston County and opportunities for Bassmaster tournaments. The Forest Service would entertain proposals and consider working through a partnership on access. Generally speaking, lands along Smith Lake that are being discussed here are not given up in a land exchange. An on-going exchange we are working on adjacent to Smith Lake retains the shoreline portion of the property that is being exchanged to a private landowner. There was a question on whether the Forest Service would exchange shoreline for shoreline properties. The Forest Service would consider that and it would depend on the conservation value. James Barnacastle shared that those tracts of National Forest system lands on Smith Lake are considered precious nuggets because they won't be developed and provide access for recreation.

Rutger Hyche asked about the appropriate process for hosting fishing tournaments and public events at the Forest Service recreation areas. A recent fishing tournament at Corinth worked with the private concessionaire at Corinth to pay the entrance fee and use the ramp. A special use is required for this activity in the future, when it involves fees and/or a commercial enterprise.

There were also questions about the boat ramp on Brushy Creek at County Road 63 and whether any projects are in the works to repair the site. Ranger Scott answered that something needs to be done and it is a complicated project, but we would entertain any discussion with partners to address the site.

Wayne White asked about burning private land in conjunction with a Forest Service prescribed burn and burning around caves. Mr. White observed a recent prescribed burn on the Mountain Springs Road near many caves and he understood Forest Service did not burn near caves. Forest Service does burn near many caves on days when conditions for smoke dispersion are good and other conditions are met. Forest Plan guidelines have changed over the years regarding burning and bats, and many caves have been surveyed and new information gathered to facilitate burning near caves.

There was a question about the Houston Campground and how the county can be involved to re-open Houston to camping. Andy Scott answered that Houston will never be able to be re-opened to modern RV camping due to size of sites and also infrastructure issues there. It could be re-opened to camping in some capacity, perhaps. Questions about whether the County could lease Houston and open it. The Forest Service is open to discussion on these ideas on assistance with management of Houston. There could be water at the entrance station and no electricity, similar a bit to Brushy Lake, but it will not be opened back up like it was prior to closure.

Someone asked if kiosks and signage at trailhead be revamped to focus on the main points people needed to be know?

Chris Cole asked about the Caney Creek parking and trail issue. Andy Scott shared that there is an agreement with the University of Alabama to study that. He has not been able to move that project forward. Everyone agrees something is needed. Whatever is done, the trail won't be part of the current road that has been in use because it is an easement through private land.

Jimmy Mitchell asked questions about average burn size (about 500 acres) and whether we have seen an increase in the quail population. He asked questions about quail surveys and habitat management. He does not support the quail hunting closure and is concerned it will be difficult to re-open quail hunting. He does not support using "Northern Bobwhite Quail" in a project name or on signage or saying that we are restoring quail habitat because he does not consider our proposed action in the Pinetucky Longleaf Woodland Project to be sufficient to meet the stated purpose and need, which includes improving habitat for Northern Bobwhite. He expressed his concern that burning large areas is not quail habitat management and that we are not managing for quail habitat.

Contact Allison Cochran at [jera.cochran@usda.gov](mailto:jera.cochran@usda.gov) for copies of power point presentations shared at the May 5, 2022 Bankhead Liaison Panel meeting.