

Executive Summary

The Forest Service has revised the Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the Ouachita National Forest. The purpose of the Forest Plan is to provide long-term, strategic direction for natural resource management on the Forest. Projects designed to implement the direction of the Forest Plan are undertaken only after additional, project-specific environmental analysis and public involvement.

The 2005 Revised Forest Plan replaces the 1990 Amended Forest Plan for the Ouachita National Forest. The need to revise this Forest Plan was driven by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requirement that such plans be revised at least every 15 years and by changing conditions and expectations identified in the Ozark-Ouachita Highlands Assessment, the Southern Forest Resource Assessment, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation results specific to the Ouachita National Forest.

Public Involvement and Issues

A Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) was published in the Federal Register on May 1, 2002, to formally initiate revision. At the same time, the formal public scoping period began. Written public comments were solicited and public meetings were held during the summer of 2002. Additional public meetings were held in the fall of 2003 and again in the spring of 2004. Plan Revision newsletters were periodically published and distributed to the Forest Plan mailing list (consisting of 2,500 individuals, groups, agencies, and organizations at its peak) during the planning process. As a result of this public involvement, the Forest Service was able to refine the issues concerning revision of the Forest Plan and future management of the Ouachita National Forest. Significant issues were grouped into four major issue categories, as follows.

Issue Category 1: Ecosystem Health and Sustainability

What forest management strategies and practices are needed to maintain or improve ecosystem health and sustainability? The four major areas of concern for this issue category are:

- Oak Decline and Mortality
- Viability of Threatened, Endangered, and Other Species of Concern
- Use of Prescribed Fire in Vegetation Management
- Use of Uneven-aged and Irregular Even-aged Silvicultural Systems

Issue Category 2: Land Use Designations

What is the appropriate balance and combination of land use designations? The three areas of concern for this category are:

- Changes needed in definitions and standards for Management Area 9 (water and riparian areas)
- Roadless areas that may be eligible and suitable for wilderness recommendation(s) (36 CFR 219.17)
- Changes needed for suitability determinations, including lands suitable for timber production (36 CFR 219.14(d)) [For the Ouachita National Forest, the required 10-year review of lands not suitable for timber production is being accomplished with this revision.]

Issue Category 3: Public Access and Recreational Activities

How should the Forest provide public access while safeguarding ecosystem health? The four areas of concern for this category are:

- Changes needed in management standards and desired conditions for the transportation system within the Ouachita National Forest, including road densities
- Changes needed to address existing and likely future conflicts among dispersed recreation activities
- The mix of developed and dispersed recreation opportunities on the Forest
- Forest Plan direction concerning the off road use of motorized vehicles

Issue Category 4: Relationship of the National Forest to Communities

What forest management direction should be implemented to support community development needs in and around the Ouachita National Forest? The three areas of concern for this category are:

- Changes in harvest levels and their projected effects on local economies
- Effects of recreation, wildlife-related activities, and tourism on local economies
- Effect of fuels management within the National Forest in relation to communities at risk

Management Areas

Management Areas (MA) for the Ouachita National Forest are geographically defined areas with unique characteristics and different desired conditions accompanied by forest-wide and (normally) MA-specific management standards. In all alternatives except A (No Action Alternative), a slightly revised set of MAs and MA descriptions is used. The MAs for Alternative A are the same as the 1990 Forest Plan. Table ES.1 compares the MAs for the action alternatives to the MAs in the 1990 Forest Plan (Alternative A).

Table ES.1 Management Areas for Alternatives B, C, D, and E compared to 1990 Plan

Management Areas (MAs) for Alternatives B, C, D, and E	Management Areas (MAs) for Alternative A (1990 Amended Forest Plan)
MA 1: Wilderness (1a); Poteau Mountain (1b), Recommended Wilderness Addition (1c)	MA 1: Wilderness; MA 1a: Poteau Mountain
MA 2: Special Interest Areas: Scenic Areas (2a); Watchable Wildlife Areas (2b); Rich Mountain and South Fourche Botanical Areas (2c); Rich Mountain Recreation Area (2d)	MA 2: Scenic Areas
MA 3: Developed Recreation Areas	MA 3: Recreation Sites
MA 4: Research Natural Areas and National Natural Landmarks	MA 4: Research Natural Areas and National Natural Landmarks
MA 5: Experimental Forests	MA 5: Alum Creek and Crossett Experimental Forest
MA 6: Rare Upland Communities	MA 6: Threatened, Endangered or Sensitive Species Habitat
MA 7: Ouachita Seed Orchard	MA 7: Ouachita Seed Orchard
MA 8: Administrative Sites/Special Uses	MA 8: Administrative Sites
MA 9: Water and Riparian Communities	MA 9: Water and Riparian Areas
MA 10: Reserved	MA 10: Non-Forest
MA 11: Reserved	MA 11: Not Appropriate for Timber Production
MA 12: Reserved	MA 12: Unproductive
MA 13: Reserved	MA 13: Ouachita Mountains, Unsuitable Lands Based on Other Resource Coordination
MA 14: Ouachita Mountains, Habitat Diversity Emphasis	MA 14: Ouachita Mountains, Lands Suitable for Timber Production
MA 15: West Gulf Coastal Plain, Habitat Diversity Emphasis	MA 15: Coastal Plain
MA 16: Lands Surrounding Lake Ouachita and Broken Bow Lake	MA 16: Lake Ouachita
MA 17: Semi Primitive	MA 17: Semi-Primitive Motorized
MA 18: Reserved (scenery management addressed Forest-wide)	MA 18: Visually Sensitive Foreground Areas, Roads And Trails
MA 19: Winding Stair Mountain National Recreation Area (and Associated Non-Wilderness Designations)	MA 19: Winding Stair Mountain National Recreation and Wilderness Area (OK) and Rich Mountain Recreation and Black Fork Wilderness Area (AR)
MA 20: Wild and Scenic River Corridors	MA 20: Wild and Scenic River Corridors
MA 21: Old Growth Restoration	MA 21: Old Growth Restoration
MA 22: Renewal of the Shortleaf Pine/Bluestem Grass Ecosystem and Red-cockaded Woodpecker Habitat	MA 22: Renewal of the Shortleaf Pine/Bluestem Grass Ecosystem And Red-cockaded Woodpecker Habitat
MA 23: Reserved – Broken Bow Lake MA was incorporated with Lake Ouachita MA in MA 16	MA 23: Broken Bow Lake (NF lands above)

Alternatives

The Plan Revision Interdisciplinary (ID) Team developed a broad range of Forest Plan alternatives to address the significant issues. Seven draft alternatives were presented to the Forest Leadership Team (FLT) in January 2004. After review and discussion, the FLT directed the ID Team to carry forward three of the seven draft alternatives for detailed analysis and to merge two others into one. Two of the seven draft alternatives—the minimum level of management and the maximum production potential—were eliminated from detailed consideration and used only for analysis benchmarks.

The FLT determined that four alternatives (plus the present Forest Plan as the No Action Alternative) were sufficient to address the need for change and the significant issues. The range of alternatives considered in detail in this FEIS reflects the relatively modest need for change and the nature of the significant issues identified.

Alternative A (1990 Plan) would make no changes in management direction in the 1990 Amended Forest Plan, as amended through 2005. Management Areas (MAs), projected resource management actions, and all other Plan components would remain unchanged. The 1990 Forest Plan, as amended, would continue to be implemented. This alternative is the No Action Alternative and serves as a baseline to which the other alternatives are compared.

Alternative B would make no major adjustments to management direction in the 1990 Amended Forest Plan, as amended through 2005. Changes would be limited to those needed to comply with pertinent changes in law and policy; update projections for acres of prescribed burning, thinning, and regeneration harvests; adjust the Forest Plan to the new model format; and make cross-country travel by motorized vehicle unsuitable; and remove obsolete or unnecessary direction.

Alternative C would place the most emphasis on active management for ecosystem health. Management activities would focus on restoring and maintaining native pine-grass, oak woodland, and other fire and disturbance dependant ecosystems. Activities such as prescribed burning and thinning would be more intensive than the other alternatives. Three additions to existing wildernesses would be recommended: 620 acres to the Flatside Wilderness in Arkansas, 77 acres to the East Unit of Poteau Mountain Wilderness in Arkansas, and 1,096 acres to the Upper Kiamichi Wilderness in Oklahoma. Cross-country travel by motorized vehicles, including OHVs, would be unsuitable.

Alternative D would increase emphasis on recreation opportunities, scenery management, and wilderness designation, while focusing ecosystem health activities in support of wildlife based recreation. Compared to the 1990 Forest Plan (Alternative A), this alternative would maintain or make modest changes in projections for most forms of forest management, with increases in prescribed burning and thinning in MA 21-Old Growth Restoration (Pine-Grass Emphasis) and 22-Renewal of the Shortleaf Pine-Bluestem Ecosystem and Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat, walk-in turkey hunting areas, and cooperative wildlife management areas. This alternative would not thin as many acres as Alternatives C or E. Recommended increases in wilderness designation would total approximately 30,100 acres, including the three additions described in Alternative C and three new areas: Brush Heap, Blue Mountain, and Irons Fork, all located in Arkansas. Alternative D would make cross-country travel by motorized vehicles, including OHVs, unsuitable but would differ from other alternatives by treating OHV-based retrieval of big game as a suitable use.

Alternative E (Selected Alternative) would balance increased emphasis on recreation and ecosystem health with retention of practices that have proven effective over time by combining elements from Alternatives B, C, and D. This would include increased intensive management for native pine-grass, oak woodland, and other fire- and disturbance-dependant ecosystems. Activities such as prescribed burning and thinning would be more intensive than in Alternative B and more dispersed than in Alternative D, but less intense than Alternative C. Recommended wilderness additions would be the same as those in Alternative C. Cross-country travel by motorized vehicles, including OHVs, would be unsuitable.

Alternatives are described in more detail in Chapter 2.

Public Involvement

The public was encouraged to review and submit comments, concerns, and suggestions concerning the Draft EIS and proposed Revised Forest Plan during the formal 90-day comment period, which began February 25, 2005, with the publication of the Notice of Availability (NOA) of the Draft EIS in the Federal Register. The comment period ended May 27, 2005. A detailed description of public involvement activities during forest plan revision is provided in Appendix A of this Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), as are comments received during the 90-day comment period and responses to those comments

Summary Conclusion

The FEIS provides a detailed analysis of alternatives for revising the Land and Resource Management Plan of the Ouachita National Forest. Under the selected alternative, the 2005 Revised Forest Plan allocates land to 17 management areas; recommends increases to Flatside Wilderness, Poteau Mountain Wilderness, and Upper Kiamichi Wilderness; and identifies lands administratively available for oil and gas leasing and consents to lease (acquired lands) or sets no objection to leasing (Public Domain lands) through the Bureau of Land Management. The Selected Alternative re-affirms a recommendation that 16.5 miles of the Glover River in Oklahoma be considered for designation as a Wild and Scenic River. The R.R. Reynolds Research Natural Area (RNA) is established. The Selected Alternative contains management direction that cross-country travel by motorized vehicle is unsuitable. The alternatives examined in detail include the 1990 Amended Forest Plan and four alternatives that represent a range of projected vegetation management activities and wilderness recommendations. The Selected Alternative is Alternative E.