



**Bankhead National Forest  
Liaison Panel  
Meeting Agenda  
Moulton Recreation Center  
January 25, 2018**

- |             |  |   |
|-------------|--|---|
| <b>6:00</b> | <b>Ranger Welcome, Updates and Intro</b><br>Ground rules review                            | <b>Andy Scott</b><br>District Ranger, USFS<br>Bankhead                  |
| <b>6:15</b> | <b>Southern Pine Beetle Update</b>   | <b>Blake Addison</b><br>TMA,USFS, Bankhead                              |
| <b>6:45</b> | <b>Forest Health &amp; Restoration Projects Updates</b>                                    | <b>Jason Harris</b><br>Silviculturist, USFS, Bankhead                   |
| <b>7:15</b> | <b>Prescribed Burning Update</b>   | <b>Chris Horne</b><br>Firefighter Equipment<br>Operator, USFS, Bankhead |
| <b>7:45</b> | <b>Closeout &amp; Adjourn</b><br>Next meeting & agenda items<br>Other panel business items | <b>Andy Scott</b>   |



## Meeting Summary

### In Attendance:

Liaison Panel Members: Mike Henshaw, John Howell, James Barnacastle, Mark Kolinski, Kevin Pugh, James Alexander, Anthony Hood, Charles Borden, Randy Feltman.

Forest Service staff: Andy Scott, Allison Cochran, Jason Harris, Blake Addison, Chris Horne, Travis McDonald, Paul Richards, Dagmar Thurmond, Felicia Humphrey, Callie Schweitzer.

Public: Mike Johnson, Wes Stone, Kim Waites, Bobby Singleton, Janice Barrett, Brad Hasamear, Donald Jones, Jim Eason, Rae Ramsey, Kent George, Mike Bagwell, Rickie Garnder, Steve Archer, Michael Cook

Ranger Andy Scott provided various updates. He introduced new employees including Timber Sales Layout Forester Paul Richards and Fire Equipment Operator Chris Horne. Three new seasonal firefighters have been hired, in addition to one firefighter partnership position on Bankhead. Three positions are currently advertised, including the ORA vice Mike Cook and two timber markers.

There was a one day furlough on Monday of this week which included an orderly one day shutdown with minimal disruption to National Forest services. We've also had a few snow days. Due to snow and ice, the Forest roads are in very bad shape. We are working on them now by spreading gravel and will address them in the future with a maintenance contract. This is also true of the trails on Bankhead. Be advised of conditions and be cautious when traveling.

Timber Management Assistant Blake Addison provided an update on the Southern Pine Beetle outbreak that is ongoing. We are gearing up for our treatments (harvesting) to control Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) which was the subject of the last panel meeting. Natural Resources Staff Officer Dagmar Thurmond shared what is happening in Mississippi with SPB and what we may be facing in Alabama. The National Forests in Mississippi are about twice as big as the National Forests in Alabama and have been dealing with catastrophic levels of SPB for the last 2-3 years. They have performed cut and leave treatments on about 3900 acres. They've recruited Linda Casey, former Alabama Forestry Commission State Forester to conduct a market study to help the NFS in MS get SPB timber sales/cut and remove treatments going. The NFS in MS is larger and has bigger SPB problems than we currently do in Alabama. They are also looking chip and leave and onsite incinerators on some of the MS units. They are trying everything possible to check the spread of the SPB and are employing extraordinary measures to address SPB like pads for logging, etc. The hope is that is not what we are facing in Alabama.

Blake reviewed the SPB outbreak on Bankhead, describing the 7-10 year SPB cycle and combined drought. Aerial reconnaissance identified about 370 spots in August of 2017 on Bankhead, many of those were overlapping. About 95% of those were ground-truthed by December. Some were difficult to locate due to fixed-wing recon/mapping.

Bankhead has an SPB Environmental Assessment in place, which was updated this fall, and it allows us to conduct SPB suppression efforts. We have had some SPB activity in timber sales and we have contract provisions in place to allow us to proceed with some suppression in active sales. Brushy East Sale is our biggest active SPB suppression effort at this time. We are retaining the core of the SPB spot, where it started, which is made up of dead trees. The result is clearcutting stands to suppress the SPB. These stands in the Brushy East Sale were proposed for restoration harvest, intermediate thinning and first thinning and all are



resulting in clear cuts to suppress the SPB. The SPB have jumped the road into a stand that was thinned in 2007 and we will have to treat it in the future.

Bankhead is preparing to sale the Caney Creek Fall SPB Sale. This 45 acre SPB suppression sale is advertised for bid. The Bankhead is hoping to see what kind of interest we get in this sale and that will help us determine how we will proceed with other SPB sales. Hopefully, we will be offering bug sales in 2018 of about 1,000 acres and 18,000 ccf or 9 million board feet. This will be determined by our capacity and the timber market/capacity.

There was a question on whether cut and leave is effective. At the last panel meeting, the Forest Health Unit talked about their recommended practices and stated that cut and leave is not very effective. The recommendation for prevention was to thin at a stand level to a 50BA and leave about 25' at least between trees to disrupt pheromones. Cut and leave may be necessary for safety, but is not ideal.

There was a question about SPB spot size. It is variable between 5-10 trees in a spot to spots over 150 acres. The drought was at a landscape scale.

There was a question about SPB presence in stands that we thinned through the Forest Health and Restoration EIS. At this time, we have a few SPB in thinned stands, but those are often down in the drains where we didn't thin.

There was a question about how we will treat areas that don't lend themselves to cutting/treating and how we handle those safety wise, like trails and recreation areas? We are working on those and they are prioritized. It was noted that funding may be an issue in these situations, where SPB spots/dead trees are not in a timber sale area and they are often costly and complex to deal with.

Forest Planner Felicia Humphrey explained how we are working within the NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process on SPB. NEPA is a decision making process in which we engage the public. There are three levels of decisions for projects; a Categorical Exclusion (CE), an Environmental Assessment (EA) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). CE includes categories of activities that have been determined not to have significant environmental effects unless there are extraordinary circumstances. FS required to look and see if those extraordinary circumstances exist and if further analysis is warranted. EA's and EIS's analyze environmental impacts of all activities proposed. If analysis shows no significant impact, then the resulting analysis is an EA. If there are significant impacts, the agency will prepare an EIS. The 2014 Farm Bill expanded the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) to include a section on insect and disease prevention and control. A new category (CE), for forest health, was established. The Governor of Alabama requested the Secretary of Agriculture to designate Bankhead and Talladega National Forests as having forest health concerns. So, we can use this new category (CE) for SPB control and prevention.

Silviculturist Jason Harris presented the FY18 SPB Project CE. Jason explained our prioritization process including threat to private land, in marked/sold timber sales, in prior NEPA decisions, roads and trails/threats to public safety, restoration investments and size or activity level of the spot. He described the FY18 SPB Project proposed action which includes clearcutting loblolly pine at the stand level to control and prevent SPB. About 84% of these stands would be reforested to hardwood. The CE would include the reforestation practices, in addition to the timber harvesting and any temporary roads needed to access the sales. The proposal includes 4 prescriptions which were shared. It includes clearcutting loblolly and Virginia pines stands, retaining some hardwoods, shortleaf and longleaf pine, in addition to site preparation and release



treatments with fire, herbicide and hand tools. About 2,000 acres have been identified at this time for the FY18 SPB Project proposal.

Jason Harris also discussed the FY17 Thinning CE project to thin loblolly pine stands at risk of SPB. Some of these stands are also included in the FY18 SPB project. There was a question about these being a lower priority than SPB clear-cuts or why not just go ahead and clear cut them too, rather than thinning them. There was discussion on this topic, including the need in some places to just thin in order to encourage advanced regeneration prior to clearcutting and converting the stands. There was also discussion that thinning increases browse for wildlife. In addition to this, there were comments about establishing new “game plots” (wildlife openings). Wildlife Biologist Allison Cochran explained that creating new wildlife openings would require a different decision and would not be a part of this FY17 Thinning or FY18 SPB Project CE’s. She also encouraged people to volunteer to plant the existing wildlife openings rather than construct more which may not be able to be maintained due to staffing levels. WMA Wildlife Biologist Kevin Pugh shared that clearcutting the stands and creating early successional habitat will likely provide much better browse and habitat than any wildlife opening ever will provide. One panel member explained that SPB is not in healthy trees, it is in old and suppressed trees and there is a need to have both thinning and clear-cuts, in addition to market considerations. A “happy medium” is needed, cutting both old stands and young stands. There was much discussion on the recommendation to have 25’ between trees and basal area considerations (BA of 50 ft<sup>2</sup>). Discussion included thinning with the prescription and DFC (hardwood vs pine) in mind. There was also a question about any insect that might be killing oaks? None have been detected here at this time, but there are many drought killed and stressed oaks in the Bankhead.

Chris Horne provided an update on the Bankhead’s prescribed burning program. There are 70,000 acres in Burn Units on Bankhead. About 111,000 acres are not burned. The Bankhead prescribed burns about 20,000 acres each year. About 23% of the Forest acres are in short rotation, or are burned frequently, and about 15% of the Forest acres are in long rotation, or are burned less frequently on about a 5-10 year return interval. In 2017, Bankhead burned 3,000 acres during the growing season primarily in areas with a restoration emphasis and desired future conditions of longleaf and shortleaf pine forests. In 2017, Bankhead burned about 18,723 acres in the dormant season. In 2018, we propose to burn about 20,000 acres, with about 3,000 of those acres to be burned during the growing season in our longleaf and shortleaf pine emphasis areas, primarily. Ranger Andy Scott shared that we often get calls concerning smoke and we are using social media and traditional media outlets to help get the prescribed burning message out. If you are interested and would like to be on the prescribed burn notification list, just let us know and we will call you when we are prescribed burning near your area.

There was a question about prescribed burn effects or fire tolerance of blueberry or native vacciniums. In one area that was abundant with vacciniums, they seem to be absent or less abundant after short rotation burning.

We have data from Dr. Callie Schweitzer that she can query for us on vacciniums and additionally, we will look at the published literature and follow-up. There was also discussion and questions on the effects to turkey from prescribed burning, both dormant and growing season burns. We know that the benefit to turkeys is the creation of bugging grounds, or brood rearing habitat, which is lacking or limiting for turkey. 2-3 year fire rotation is producing these bugging grounds for turkey. There was discussion on reneating by turkeys if nest are impacted by growing season or April and May burns. There is a trade off in that amount of habitat we are creating and the nests that might be impacted. Considering we only burn about 3,000 acres during the growing season, those are likely insignificant numbers of acres being impacted over the 180,000 acre Bankhead National Forest. It was also noted that turkey mortality is highest with the female on the nest. It the forest is



too shrubby and dense and she cannot see predators, which is an effect of not burning that we never see. Again, there is an off-setting benefit of improving habitat through burning that should result in more turkeys. There was a question about the benefit of growing vs dormant season burning. Growing season burns kill a lot more shrubs and saplings like maple and poplar which is improving turkey habitat. It was encouraged that we continue to look at research on this issue.

Andy provided a wrap-up with more updates from the Bankhead. Wildlife program is conducting golden and bald eagle surveys, flattened musk turtle and waterdog surveys and feral swine control. Recreation/Engineering program is working on roads from the storm damage. The Secure Rural Schools Funding has been allocated to Lawrence and Winston County projects. The Forest Supervisor has approved the Resource Allocation Committees recommendations for these projects and funding will be coming to the counties. The Black Warrior 50K will be held at Owl Creek on Feb. 10<sup>th</sup>. The local Forest Service Law Enforcement Officer is working with local courts to get youth needing community service hours to get out and clean up trash on Bankhead. Wild South has adopted 5 miles along Hwy 33 and are cleaning up trash there and are always looking for volunteers. Wild South hosts a clean-up for the Martin Luther King Day of Service.

There was a question about snake fungal disease and snake research on Bankhead. Alabama A&M researchers are keeping an eye out and it has not been detected.

Wild South has a Winter Warmer Weekend tomorrow, an open house and then a Saturday Helping Hands Privet Pulling in the Wilderness and a hike on Saturday followed by a chili supper.

There was a concern raised by a member of the public, including a petition, about the deer population size and needed changes to Bankhead to grow the population. It was suggested to come up with proposals and set up a meeting with Kevin Pugh, Black Warrior WMA Biologist and the Bankhead staff to discuss and bring to the Liaison Panel at a later date. There was more discussion about the perceived need for more "game plots" (wildlife openings) and an idea to set up a Facebook site to donate money so the Forest Service can buy seed. It was explained we cannot take donations, nor do we often need money for seed. We work with the NWTf to buy seed, in addition to what the Forest Service purchases, and to recruit volunteers to plant wildlife openings on the Bankhead National Forest, not the Black Warrior WMA. After the meeting adjourned, a number of individuals had a lengthy discussion with Pugh on this issue. There were suggestions to add areas to the WMA and concerns by people present who can't hunt on weekends and see that the addition of areas to the WMA would mean less hunting opportunities for a number of gun deer hunters. Pugh's staff is already stretched with the amount of land that is currently in the WMA. There is the issue that people want to see more deer. There was discussion about hunting pressure and that doesn't necessarily reduce populations. Some hunters present feel like they see more deer outside of the WMA, where the pressure is perceived to be higher. Many feel that the Bankhead and black Warrior don't have as many deer as we could have. There were also discussions on antler restrictions and reducing harvest, both doe and buck.

There was a concern raised about the potential for non-native invasives to spread in the areas where we are clear-cutting to control SPB, specifically Callery Pear.

It was noted that January 15<sup>th</sup> was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1918) of the Bankhead National Forest. There was a suggestion of having an event during this year to celebrate the centennial.

Copies of powerpoint presentations are available by contacting Allison Cochran at the Bankhead District Office at 205-489-5111.