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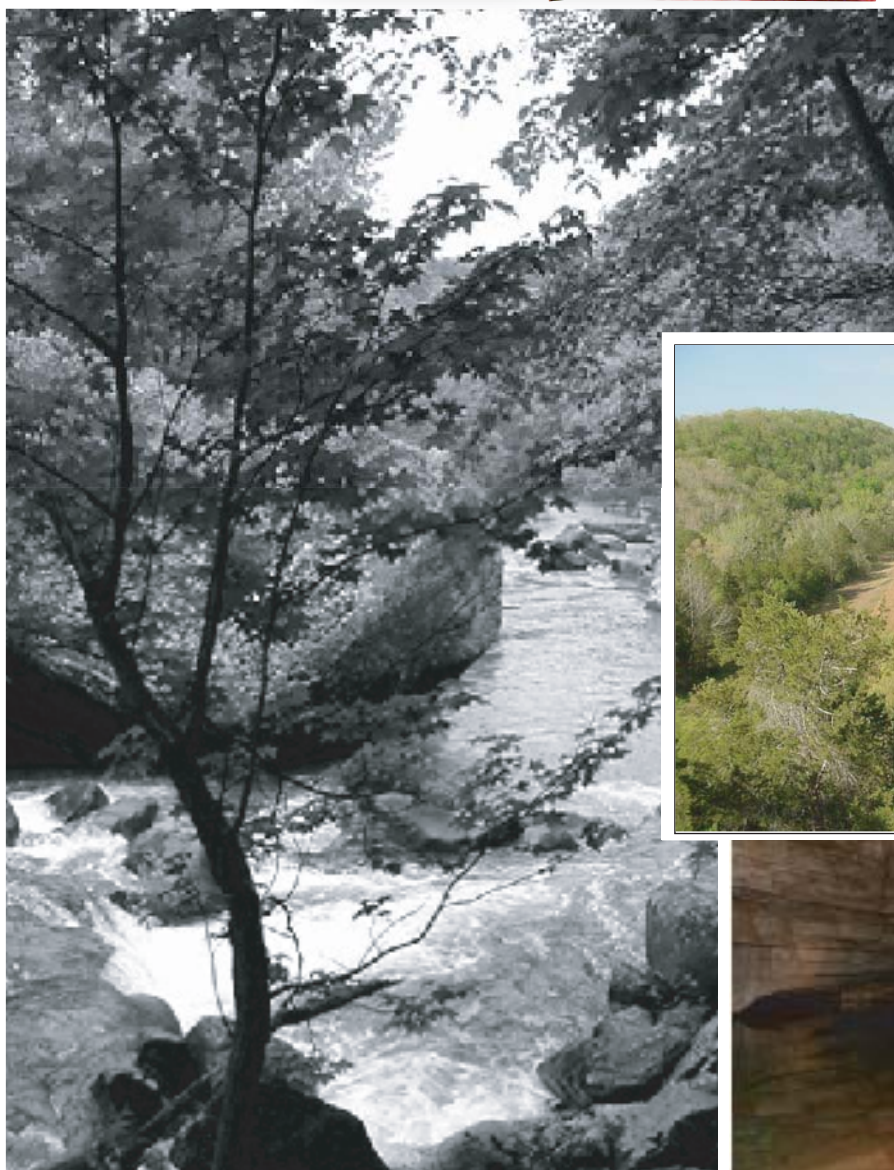
September 2005



Record of Decision For The

Final Environmental Impact Statement and Revised Land and Resource Management Plan

Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Arkansas



Management Bulletin R8-MB 125 E

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**RECORD OF DECISION
FOR THE
FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
AND
REVISED LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN**

**OZARK-ST. FRANCIS NATIONAL FORESTS
ARKANSAS**

Baxter, Benton, Conway, Crawford, Franklin, Johnson, Logan, Madison, Marion, Newton, Pope, Searcy, Stone, Van Buren, Washington, and Yell Counties, (Ozark National Forest) Lee, and Phillips Counties (St. Francis National Forest)

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September 2005

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INTRODUCTION

This Record of Decision (ROD) contains a concise description of my decision in approving the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests¹, and documents my rationale for choosing among the alternatives.

Located in a land of rolling hills and mountains primarily in Northwest Arkansas, the Ozark National Forest was created by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908. The Ozark National Forest is divided into six ranger districts and one job corps site located in 16 counties. It contains six geographical units in Northwest Arkansas: Wedington, Lee Creek, Main Division, Magazine, Sylamore, and the Henry R. Koen Experimental Forest. The 1.2 million acres of forest consist of two-thirds mixed oak and hickory hardwood and one-third shortleaf pine forest ecosystems. One of the very unique characteristics of the Ozark National Forest is the vertical sandstone and limestone bluffs.

The St. Francis National Forest is located in two counties in eastern Arkansas and derives its name from the St. Francis River. Most of the Forest is situated on Crowley's Ridge, but a portion is in the low flatlands along the Mississippi River. The St. Francis National Forest, one of the smallest national forests, covers 21,000 acres. The St. Francis National Forest was established in 1960 when it was administratively combined with the Ozark National Forest.

MY DECISION

I have selected Alternative E from the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests as the new Plan. The Revised Forest Plan describes in detail the strategic vision, priorities, objectives, standards, management area desired conditions, suitable lands, and recommendations for additions to wilderness and wild and scenic rivers.

In developing the Forest Plan, I considered social, economic and resource values and the importance of all natural resources, as well as the continued availability of goods and services the public expects from the Forests. Although none of the alternatives considered would satisfy everyone completely, Alternative E strikes a balance among competing interests to achieve the maximum net public benefits from forest resources in an environmentally sensitive manner. I believe the Forest Plan is within the physical and biological capability of the land and it can be implemented without reducing that capability. I believe this Forest Plan meets our moral, ethical, and legal obligations to the people and environment. The rate at which the Forest Plan will be implemented is based on annual funding actually received by the Forests. Attaining desired conditions in some areas and the associated outputs may be prolonged or reduced if funding is decreased.

¹“Plan” “Forest Plan”, and “Revised Forest Plan” are used interchangeably throughout the document.

Among the goals outlined in the Revised Forest Plan, we intend to:

- ▶ Manage for forest health (using both balance age classes and ecosystem restoration).
- ▶ Increase the prescribed burning program up to 120,000 acres annually to emphasize forest health, ecosystem restoration, wildlife habitat and species viability, and hazardous fuels reduction.
- ▶ Emphasize controlling invasive non-native species.
- ▶ Implement management prescriptions for the Indiana bat.
- ▶ Emphasize producing high-quality wood products.
- ▶ Emphasize maintaining habitat for diversity of species.
- ▶ Emphasize rare, unique, and sensitive species habitats.
- ▶ Focus developed recreation on high-use, low-cost activities, and shift the overall recreation program towards more dispersed activities such as day-use, sightseeing, and trail opportunities.
- ▶ Manage the Wedington Unit as an urban recreation area.
- ▶ Work with the public and the trails strategy team to designate open and closed roads and trails.
- ▶ Emphasize dispersed recreation opportunities in the Upper Buffalo and Indian Creek areas.
- ▶ Add 4 additional special interest areas, bringing the Forests' total to 21.
- ▶ Recommend 471 acres of adjacent land for wilderness additions.
- ▶ Recommend the North Fork of the Illinois Bayou be added to the National Wild and Scenic River System as a scenic river.
- ▶ Add additional scenic byways across the Forests, bringing the total to nine.
- ▶ Emphasize closing open roads (primarily gates and mounds) or using seasonal road closures, generally decreasing the overall road density.

This decision applies only to Ozark-St. Francis National Forests lands and does not apply to any other federal, state, or private lands, although the effects to these lands and the effects of my decision on lands surrounding the Forests are considered.

A Forest Plan is part of the long-range resource planning framework established by the Resource Planning Act (RPA). The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires all Forests in the National Forest System to develop plans that direct resource management activities. These plans are to be revised when conditions have changed significantly, or on a 10-to-15 year cycle. The previous Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) was approved in 1986. Work to revise the LRMP began in 2002.

COMPONENTS OF THE DECISION

The FEIS and Revised Forest Plan were developed according to the NFMA implementing regulations, 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219 that were in effect before November 9, 2000; National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); and the Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations, 40 CFR 1500-1508.

The Revised Forest Plan provides direction to assure coordination of multiple-uses (outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife, fish, and wilderness) and sustained yield of products and services [16 USC 1604(e)]. It fulfills legislative requirements and addresses local, regional, and national issues and concerns. The FEIS discloses the environmental consequences of the alternative management strategies and how they respond to issues and concerns. I have studied and considered the FEIS in order to make the following decisions:

1. Approval of forest-wide management direction, desired conditions, and associated long-range strategic goals for the next 10 to 15 years in order to provide for multiple use and sustained yield of the services and opportunities people demand from the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, including outdoor recreation, timber, range, water, wildlife, fish, wild and scenic rivers, and wilderness. The Revised Forest Plan establishes this direction in Part 1. [36 CFR 219.11(b)].
2. Approval of forest-wide program priorities, objectives including performance indicators, and establishment of twenty-five management areas with associated desired conditions and monitoring elements. These management areas emphasize specific land use, biological, physical, watershed, and social differences, which reflect a diversity of desired conditions and provide the specific information used to develop projects to implement the Revised Forest Plan. These Management Areas are displayed on the Revised Forest Plan allocation map. The Revised Forest Plan establishes this direction in Part 2. [36 CFR 219.11(c)].
3. Approval of the Revised Forest Plan standards, which serve as design criteria and sideboards for achieving the strategic goals, priorities, objectives, and desired conditions and provide meaningful direction when implementing projects. The Revised Forest Plan contains standards that apply forest wide as well as those that apply to management areas. The Revised Forest Plan establishes this direction in Part 3. [36 CFR 219.13 to 219.27].
4. Designation of suitable and unsuitable land uses, including lands that are suitable for timber production (approximately 785,473 acres), mineral leasing, and identification of the maximum timber harvesting levels, or Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ), consistent with ensuring a sustainable forest resource. The suitability of different lands for different uses on Ozark-St. Francis National Forests is described in the suitable or unsuitable uses in Part 1, and by management area in Part 2 of the Revised Forest Plan. The ASQ of 146 million cubic feet and the associated treatment acres are found in Appendix E of the Revised Forest Plan. [36 CFR 219.14 and 36 CFR 219.16].
5. Approval of monitoring and evaluation requirements needed to ensure that the plan direction is carried out, determine how well outputs and effects were predicted, and help the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests identify necessary future plan changes. These requirements are contained in Part 1, Part 2, and Appendix J of the Revised Forest Plan. [36 CFR 219.11(d)].
6. Recommendation of the following special designations, found in Part 2 of the Revised Forest Plan:
 - a. A total of 471 acres are being recommended as additions to the Leatherwood, Richland Creek, and East Fork wilderness areas. This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. The Congress has reserved

the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation. Until Congress makes a decision on wilderness designation, these areas will be managed within Management Area 1.B.

- b. A total of 22.6 miles of the North Fork of the Illinois River are being recommended as a scenic river. This recommendation is a preliminary administrative recommendation that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and the President of the United States. The Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation. Until Congress makes a decision on wilderness designation, these areas will be managed within Management Area 1.D.

- 7. I am also making the decision to consent to lease 1,092,258 acres for oil and gas development and exploration [36 CFR 228.102 (e)]. This includes 58,616 acres with a no surface occupancy stipulation, 458,883 acres with a controlled surface use stipulation, and 574,759 acres with standard stipulations. The environmental effects of this decision are disclosed in the FEIS for the Revised Forest Plan.

RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

My decision to select Alternative E for implementation is based on a careful and reasoned comparison of the response of each alternative to the five significant issues. These issues represent the multiple uses and conflicting demands of the Ozark National Forest, and the St. Francis National Forest.

The selected alternative continues the multiple-use management that has directed management of these forests since their inception and resulted in the wonderful array of resources that we now manage. This alternative provides a strong environmental and resource ethic to continue the long history of land management and still meets many of the desires of public interest on at least a portion of the national forests. Some resource uses and public interests do directly conflict with each other, but a significant number can co-exist very well when we do a quality job of planning their location, design, and maintenance. For those that do conflict, there are management areas allocated to emphasize certain resources. There are areas where no commercial activity is allowed. These areas meet the need for solitude, scenic beauty, and natural processes. There are other areas where commercial timber harvest helps achieve wildlife objectives, insures species viability, manages for ecosystem health while producing wood products and improving hunting opportunities. Some areas on the Ozark National Forest are managed for high quality forest products, and producing high-quality sawtimber is an emphasis.

The underpinning that holds multiple-use management together is proper protection of the basic resources of soil and water. The selected alternative fully protects water quality throughout the Forests through standards that meet or exceed Arkansas's best management practices (BMPs), and that direct precautions to limit soil and water effects whenever management activities are prescribed. The Forest Plan maintains consistency with all laws, regulations, executive orders, and other agency directives and requirements. Maintaining and restoring forest health and habitat for native species of plants and animals that live on the Forests is also a cornerstone of the Revised Forest Plan.

Some of the major reasons I believe Alternative E does the best job in addressing the major issues include:

- ▶ Alternative E has 25 management areas (MAs), the highest among all the alternatives. Alternative A has 13 MAs, Alternative B has 17, Alternative C has 22, and Alternative D has 14 MAs. The allocation of land to more management areas allows the Forests to emphasize specific desired conditions, better addressing the issues.
- ▶ Alternative E proposes a moderate increase in prescribed burning, compared to the other alternatives; Alternative C has the largest increase. With the mixed ownership, and proximity to small and large communities, Alternative E provides the direction needed to do a good job of smoke management while achieving the forest health goals under this alternative.
- ▶ Alternative E provides a mix of ecosystem restoration and balanced age classes to achieve forest health. Alternative C has a restoration emphasis; while Alternatives A, B, and D depend on a high quality forest products emphasis to manage for forest health. I believe a combination is best at this time.
- ▶ Alternative E does a better job of meeting recreation demand by allocating the Wedington Unit as an urban recreation area, and allocating the Indian Creek and Upper Buffalo Areas to a dispersed recreation emphasis.

Specific reasons I chose Alternative E are discussed below on an issue-by-issue basis. The response of each alternative to the five significant issues was a major consideration in my decision to select Alternative E. They explain why I believe Alternative E, as described in the FEIS, will maximize net public benefits when compared to the other alternatives. Chapter 3 of the FEIS describes in detail the effects of expected management actions on the various forest resources.

RESPONSE TO THE ISSUES

Issue 1–Mix of Recreation Opportunities

The Ozark-St. Francis National Forests have been providing a wide variety of recreational opportunities including traditional recreation uses such as camping, hiking, horseback riding, swimming, hunting, fishing, and driving for pleasure. Other increasingly popular uses such as mountain biking, rock climbing, shooting ranges, and whitewater activities have been increasing, and these trends are expected to continue. Over the next few decades, tremendous population growth is expected in many cities surrounding the Forests, especially in Northwest Arkansas. The Ozark NF needs to be prepared to meet these demands. The St. Francis NF is expecting declining population growth in counties surrounding the Forest. By adding an additional scenic byway and the Mississippi River State Park, Alternative E will add tourism-based opportunities that will provide more economic stability to the surrounding communities.

I believe Alternative E does the best overall job of providing high quality developed and dispersed recreation opportunities emphasizing the Forests' role and unique niche in providing outdoor recreation while considering other multiple-use goals. Alternatives A and D propose no new recreation MAs, and don't provide the necessary shift toward dispersed recreation the Forests need to meet future demand. Alternative B focuses on high quality

recreation areas that are cost efficient, but does not provide the balance I believe the Forests need. Alternative C focuses on restoration of ecological communities, which would provide a greater amount of activities such as wildlife viewing, but it does not provide the balance the Forests need.

Some highlights of how Alternative E addresses this issue include:

- ▶ Focusing dispersed recreation on high-use, low-cost activities, and shifting recreation toward day-use, sightseeing, and trail opportunities.
- ▶ Focusing developed recreation on high-use, low cost activities that support dispersed recreation opportunities.
- ▶ Adding the Wedington Unit as an urban recreation area.
- ▶ Adding the Upper Buffalo and Indian Creek Dispersed Recreation Areas.

Issue 2–Public Access

Ozark-St. Francis National Forests' users have a long tradition of using Forest Service roads for hunting, traveling to see family, or just recreational use. Forest Service roads are the primary means of national forest access. This issue was very controversial during plan revision. Some people would like to see the majority of the Forests accessible by roads to maximize opportunities for hunting, driving for pleasure, and resource management. Other people are concerned that the Forests have too many roads, the road density is currently too high, and that some existing roads should be closed (gates or mounds) or obliterated to protect water resources and sensitive wildlife habitat. The Upper Buffalo Dispersed Recreation Area Management Area (MA 2.D) allocation addresses this need by providing non-motorized recreation experiences, while the Indian Creek Dispersed Recreation Area (MA 2.F) allocation strikes a balance by allowing some motorized access. Alternatives A, B and D don't include these MAs, and don't address this issue as well. With Alternatives A and D focusing on balanced age classes and a higher timber output, road density is likely to stay similar to what it is currently. Alternatives B, C, and E all project slightly lower road densities.

This issue also includes use of off-highway-vehicles (OHVs) on forest roads and trails. The existing Forest Plan permits OHV use only on designated roads and trails. There are several multiple use trails that allow OHV use. Currently, OHV use is prohibited on the Wedington Unit of the Ozark National Forest and the entire St. Francis National Forest. I believe Alternative E reaches a balance in addressing this controversial issue by allocating MAs for both motorized and non-motorized use.

Some highlights of how Alternative E addresses this issue include:

- ▶ Using the Trails Strategy Team to consider the use of some Level 1 and Level 2 Roads for OHV trails and to designate other open roads and trails.
- ▶ Managing the Indian Creek Dispersed Recreation Area as both motorized and non-motorized.
- ▶ Emphasizing closing open roads (primarily gates and mounds) or using seasonal road closures.
- ▶ Generally decreasing the road density.

Issue 3–Special Areas

The Ozark-St. Francis National Forests contain several special interest areas (SIAs) such as roadless areas, wild and scenic rivers, wildernesses, research natural areas, scenic byways, and experimental forests. The existing plan identified 18 SIAs. These areas have unique scenic, geological, botanical, or cultural values. Dismal Creek SIA was later designated as a Research Natural Area by Congress, thus reducing the total to 17 SIAs. During the process of the plan revision, the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests used a set of criteria to determine if areas listed in Amendment 5 to the current Plan or any other areas on the Forests had special, unique qualities and should be considered as additional SIAs. Using those criteria, 4 new SIAs are being added in Alternative E bringing the total to 21 SIAs designated as MA 1.G. This management area will perpetuate the unique values associated with each SIA, and provide public benefit through recreational use.

This issue also encompasses the evaluation of inventoried roadless areas that may exist within the Forests for their potential as wilderness. The first step in the evaluation of potential wilderness is to identify and inventory all roadless, undeveloped areas that satisfy the definition of wilderness found in Section 2 (c) of the 1964 Wilderness Act (FSH 1909.12, Chapter 7, Item 7.1). One of the criteria provide for an individual roadless area to include no more than one-half mile of improved road for each 1,000 acres. The Ozark-St. Francis National Forests completed this inventory and found that no areas, including the original RARE II areas or adjacent lands, currently meet the criteria for inclusion in the roadless area inventory. Nevertheless, Alternative E does recommend adding 471 acres of lands adjacent to wilderness as wilderness additions. This will help create boundaries that are easier to administer, and will help maintain wilderness values.

Another facet of this issue is to determine eligibility of additional rivers for wild and scenic designation. The Ozark-St. Francis National Forests have six Wild and Scenic Rivers designated by Congress in 1992. A re-evaluation of the study used to determine suitability revealed the only change that has occurred was in the status of the North Fork of the Illinois Bayou. I feel that all 22.6 miles of the river as outlined in the study is now suitable to recommend for scenic river designation since it is no longer being considered as a water source for the city of Russellville.

The Ozark-St. Francis National Forests currently have six scenic byways. Alternative E adds three scenic byways bringing the total to nine byways (239 miles). The Revised Forest Plan creates MA 1.H as an emphasis area for scenic byways. I feel by adding this management area, we can increase tourism benefits to the local and state economies. Lastly, this revision proposes no changes for experimental forests or research natural areas other than to create special management areas to emphasize their values.

I believe Alternative E does the best job of addressing this multi-faceted issue. Alternatives A and D do not recommend wilderness additions or the North Fork of the Illinois Bayou as a scenic river, nor do they add additional SIAs or scenic byways. Alternative B does add additional scenic byways and the wild and scenic river, but has no SIA or wilderness additions.

Some highlights of how Alternative E addresses this multi faceted issue include:

- ▶ Adding new special interest areas.
- ▶ Recommending 471 acres for wilderness additions.
- ▶ Recommending the North Fork of the Illinois Bayou as a scenic river.
- ▶ Adding new scenic byways across the Forests.
- ▶ Maintaining the existing RNAs and experimental forests. All alternatives maintain existing RNAs.

Issue 4–Ecosystem Health and Sustainability

Ecosystem management is a concept of natural resources management wherein national forest activities are considered within the context of economic, ecological, and social interactions within a defined area or region over both the short and long term. Ecosystem management is a shift in focus from managing outputs of ecosystems to maintaining the structure and function of ecosystems through time for the benefit of present and future generations. The current plan focuses on single resources such as timber, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, or recreation. It focuses on the "parts," not the "whole" of an ecosystem. I feel the existing plan has served the Forests well, but changes are needed to manage ecological communities to meet future challenges.

I have chosen Alternative E because it combines the best of all the alternatives in managing for forest health by emphasizing a combination of balanced aged class and ecosystem restoration management. Alternative A and D focus mainly on a balanced age class approach. Alternative B has a large Custodial Management Area (O.A), and I do not believe forest health can be achieved without active vegetative management. Alternative C focuses on ecosystem restoration; however, I believe that a more balanced approach is needed in our efforts to reach the desired conditions for pine and oak woodlands.

Alternative E will improve most of the indicators for ecological communities and species groups. Some of the indicators will remain below ecologically desirable benchmarks. However, the status of these indicators is not expected to result in unacceptable risks to the viability of their associated species.

Some highlights of how Alternative E addresses this issue include:

- ▶ Harvesting approximately 145,000 acres in the 1st decade including 60,000 acres of thinning, 65,000 acres of regeneration, and 20,000 acres of uneven-aged management. This trend continues through the 5th decade.
- ▶ Increasing the acres in Fire Regime Condition Class 1 or 2 (the most desirable classes).
- ▶ Using prescribed fire on approximately 120,000 acres annually.
- ▶ Allocating 252,333 acres to Management Areas 3.A and 3.B, which emphasize restoration of pine and oak woodlands.
- ▶ Focusing on key factors to improve conditions within ecological communities, improving habitats that support species viability.
- ▶ Maintaining an early seral component of 6 to 10 percent in all community types.

Issue 5 - Relationship of National Forest Management to Communities and Economies

The Ozark-St. Francis National Forests are a mosaic of federal land intermingled with tracts of private land, industrial timberland, and rural communities. Due to the large amount of private ownership (24% inside the forest boundary are private lands), many communities, private landowners, and forest users are directly affected by forest management decisions. Local governments are increasingly attuned to the need for economic diversity. The Forest Service has the ability to affect jobs by direct employment, contracting, and indirect support of the private sector economy.

I believe Alternative E does the best job in sustaining local communities and economies. Alternative E allocates 18 percent of National Forest land to recreation emphasis areas. This compares to 13 percent for Alternatives A and D, 15 percent for Alternative B, and 16 percent for Alternative C. I feel this is an important difference since recreation-based tourism is one of the largest economic contributors to the State economy. Our economic analysis of Alternative E predicts fewer potential jobs related to the timber industry than for alternatives A or D; however, it also predicts a higher number of recreation-related jobs under Alternative E than for all the other alternatives. Alternative E also has the second highest present net value. Payments to counties are similar in all alternatives.

Some highlights of how Alternative E addresses this issue include:

- ▶ Predicted estimates of annual employment in the following resource areas based on Alternative E projected activities are 2,115 recreation jobs, 459 wildlife jobs, and 712 jobs related to vegetation management.
- ▶ Estimated labor income based on Alternative E projected activities include recreation, \$41.6 million; wildlife, \$9.1 million; and vegetation management, \$25.3 million.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE ALTERNATIVE

The Council on Environmental Quality has defined the "environmentally preferable" alternative as: "... [T]he alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA's section 101. Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources." Many of the alternatives address historic and cultural uses of the Forests, as well as protection and enhancement of the natural resources that exist on the Forests.

Alternative E is the environmentally preferable alternative. It provides the best balance of long-term improvements in the social, economic, physical, and biological environment. In reading the descriptions of Alternatives B and C, it might appear that these alternatives would have fewer negative human-induced changes to the environment than Alternative E. However, Alternative B focuses vegetation management to produce high quality timber on high index sites and has a large custodial management area of 518,791 acres where no management would occur. I believe this lack of active management would create significant long-term risk of insect and disease threats and a loss of biological diversity over time. Alternative C focuses more on an ecosystem restoration approach, and increases the use of prescribed fire up to 150,000 acres annually. Alternative E combines portions of both Alternatives B and C into

a more balanced approach. I prefer to have a more manageable prescribed fire program, greater flexibility to address a wider variety of forest health needs, and reasonable progress towards ecosystem restoration goals during this next planning period (10 to 15 years).

Alternatives with Higher Present Net Value

Among the purposes and principles of National Forest System Land and Resource Management Planning are this: “[...]he resulting plans shall provide for multiple use and sustained yield of goods and services from the National Forest System in a way that maximizes long-term net public benefits in an environmentally sound manner” [36 CFR §219.1(a)]. Net public benefits can be defined as the overall value to the Nation of all outputs (benefits) and positive effects, less all associated inputs (costs) and negative effects, whether they can be quantitatively valued or not.

A component of determining net public benefits is the present net value (PNV), which is used to measure the economic efficiency of each alternative. A comparison of the alternatives’ PNV is shown in Chapter 3 of the FEIS. As shown in the table, only Alternative A has a cumulative higher PNV than the selected alternative. PNV includes market and non-market values, which can be assigned a price either based on money the Forest Service actually receives for market goods like timber, or on estimated values from Forest Service research for non-market amenities like wildlife and recreation.

However, PNV was not my only concern when deciding on a preferred alternative. Based on the preceding discussions, it is clear that Alternative E has the greatest long-term beneficial impact on the environment although it does not generate as many market and non-market valued commodities as Alternative A. However, I believe Alternative E achieves a balance between economic and environmental benefits for the American people. I believe this alternative will increase net public benefits by moving the Forests toward improved forest health through its emphasis on restoring native landscape diversity and unique plant and animal habitats.

CHANGES BETWEEN DRAFT AND FINAL EIS

After the release of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), many changes to Alternative E were made to respond to public comments and improve the management direction. More than 1,890 comments were received on the DEIS and Proposed Revised Forest Plan for the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests. Many of these comments and contacts offered recommendations or requests for changes or improvements in the environmental analysis; identified changes or improvements to the alternatives; or suggested modifications to the priorities, objectives, or standards. Comments received also identified the need for several minor improvements to the presentation of materials, including removing extraneous information and the organization of the various elements of the Plan and FEIS. As a result, editorial errors, missing information, duplication, and other inconsistencies were corrected in the final documents.

Changes to Alternative E and the environmental analysis outside the scope listed above are highlighted in this section.

General Changes

In several areas of the FEIS, (such as sections pertaining to major forest communities, viability analysis, and the socioeconomic analysis) additional information was added to clarify the analysis process and the information used in comparing alternatives.

Management Area Allocations

Several management area names and numbers were modified based on public comments about need for more clarity.

Priorities, Objectives, and Monitoring

Feedback from the public was used to refine the priorities and objectives, primarily by splitting out some key activities to provide clearer average annual objectives. The number of objectives has increased, and each objective now has performance indicators to measure how desired conditions or program priorities are being met. A new monitoring section has been added as an appendix to the plan, and new monitoring elements have been added throughout the plan.

Standards

Feedback from the public and scientific community was used to refine the standards in the document and to clarify the sideboards by which activities may occur. Many of these came from key partners in the conservation community.

Indian Creek Dispersed Recreation Area

We received numerous public comments regarding our proposals in the DEIS for Indian Creek to be a non-motorized recreation area. After meeting with user groups and having a focus group meeting, I have changed the emphasis to include motorized use in Indian Creek. Appropriate motorized use in this area will be developed by the Forests' Trails Strategy Team and public input over the next few years.

Changes to Further Address Forest Health

Based on comments received concerning how the DEIS addressed forest health, we increased the annual acres treated from 12,000 to 15,000. The ASQ increased from 11.3 MMCF (million cubic feet) per decade to 14.6 MMCF per decade. We changed our approach to major ecological communities by focusing on key factors to improve habitat for species viability.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Throughout the development of this Revised Forest Plan, the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests concentrated on creating opportunities for meaningful and ongoing public involvement. The interdisciplinary team worked to foster a dialogue with groups, agencies, and individuals, providing for two-way rather than one-way communication. The team accomplished this through a variety of methods, including a newsletter (*The Ozark*

Connection), and use of the Forest's internet site. Public meetings were held across the State during the scoping and alternative development phases of the Forest Plan revision. Meetings included both a presentation-type format and open houses. In March and April, 2005, six open house meetings were held around the Forests to address questions the public had about the draft EIS and revised plan.

The Proposed Revised Forest Plan and the Draft Environmental Impact Statement were published and released for public review and comment on February 25, 2005. The comment period was planned to expire on May 26, 2005; however, it was extended to June 25, 2005 based on requests for additional time to review the alternatives. The Forests received more than 1,890 letters, emails, faxes, and various forms of comments, which were summarized into approximately 900 public concerns. Each comment within a letter that provided factual information, professional opinion, or informed judgment relating to the DEIS and Revised Forest Plan was entered into a database. The letters and comments are part of the process records located in the Supervisor's Office. Responses to the public concerns can be found in Appendix F of the FEIS.

ALTERNATIVES

Five alternatives were analyzed in detail in the FEIS including Alternative E, the Selected Alternative. Two additional alternatives were considered, but eliminated from detailed study for reasons given in Chapter 2 of the FEIS. All alternatives considered in detail meet legal and environmental standards.

The management theme for each of the alternatives is provided below. Although every alternative address all five of the significant issues, the themes described here focus only on the emphasis areas for each alternative. More information regarding how each alternative responds to the issues, distinguishing characteristics, and acreage allocated for the management and prescription areas are provided in Chapter 2 of the FEIS. Detailed discussions of the environmental effects for the alternatives considered in detail are included in Chapter 3 of the FEIS.

Alternatives Eliminated From Detailed Study

Minimum Management Alternative

This alternative would emphasize resource management with minimal human intervention to the natural resources. Active management would be for the protection of resources, for meeting legal requirements, and for maintaining current recreation opportunities.

After considering this preliminary information, it was determined that a Minimum Management Alternative did not need to be further evaluated in detail in this FEIS. The reasons are:

- ▶ After further analyses, it was determined that this alternative, as originally envisioned, would not meet all the legal requirements of the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976, the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act (MUSYA) of 1960, and the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.

- ▶ This alternative does not address all the forest planning issues that have been identified by the public.
- ▶ Another alternative (Alternative B) considered in detail provides for relatively low levels of management activities.

The NFMA planning regulations specify that the planning team should "formulate a broad range of reasonable alternatives according to NEPA procedures" [36 CFR 219.12(f)]. NEPA requires that the alternatives respond to the "purpose and need." The "purpose and need" of revising the Forest Plan is to address the changing conditions that were identified on the OSFNFs including an analysis of the current situation and changing public values as represented by the five issues. This alternative, with its emphasis on "minimal human intervention," would not address all these issues and would not meet the "purpose and need" as required by NEPA.

Sierra Club Alternative

The Sierra Club presented this alternative, entitled the "The Citizens' Forest Plan." The Sierra Club requested that this plan be adopted by the U.S. Forest Service to guide the management of the Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests. The full text of the Sierra Club's proposal is included in the process record and summarized in Chapter 2 of the FEIS.

After reviewing the Citizens' Alternative, the interdisciplinary team concluded that most of the proposals were already incorporated into the full range of Alternatives B, C, D, and E; therefore, this alternative was not analyzed in detail. Further explanation of why the Sierra Club's proposal was not analyzed in detail is included in the process record and summarized in Chapter 2 of the FEIS.

Other Alternative Proposals

During the 90-day comment period, a timber company spokesman suggested that the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests develop a new alternative that would "consider the positive environmental health on air, water, soil, wildlife, trails, roads, healthy industries, positive economics and recreation purposes without any constraints placed on budgets, manpower or supervisors direction." This alternative was not examined in detail because it contained too many parameters to incorporate into a reasonable alternative. Furthermore, alternatives unconstrained by budgets or personnel are inherently infeasible, particularly in an environment where budgets and personnel are steadily declining. However, the parameters noted by the commenter were certainly taken into consideration in making the final selection of an alternative.

Alternatives Considered In Detail

Selected Alternative E – Revised Forest Plan

Alternative E recognizes and balances the wide diversity of interests and values in management of the Forests using a mix of vegetation management practices to manage forest ecosystems. It emphasizes water quality, a variety of recreation opportunities, sustainable forest ecosystem management on lands suitable for timber production, habitat

for the full spectrum of species, and a high quality forest transportation network. Some ecosystems are restored to pre-settlement conditions based on the ecological potential and capability of the land. When possible, natural processes are mimicked in a landscape pattern. Restoration activities would produce both large and small openings. Prescribed burning is increased to 120,000 acres annually. Some of the better silvicultural sites could be managed to provide a supply of high-quality sawtimber.

The total 10-year allowable sale quantity of timber (ASQ) would be 146 million cubic feet. Generally, access will be developed, maintained, and used as needed to meet the goals of balanced age classes, ecosystem restoration, wildlife habitats, species viability, production of timber products, and recreational needs. Large and medium sized blocks of old growth are provided on both suitable and unsuitable lands. Small blocks occur scattered throughout the Forests. Integrated pest management would be implemented to reduce forest health risks.

High-quality developed and dispersed recreation opportunities occur emphasizing the Forests' role in providing outdoor recreation. The Forests shift toward dispersed recreation use opportunities such as day-use, sightseeing, and trail use. Some of the recreation opportunities provided include semi-primitive recreation opportunities, twenty-one SIAs, outstandingly remarkable river values on seven wild and scenic rivers (recommending the North Fork of the Illinois Bayou as wild and scenic), five wilderness areas, special management areas for dispersed recreation, and the designation of the Wedington Unit as an urban recreation area.

This selected alternative represents the Forests' attempt to balance diverse public interests, diverse wildlife needs, and our stewardship responsibilities as we manage the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests over the next decade or longer. This alternative is identified in the FEIS as the alternative that provides the most acceptable resolution to the needed changes in management. It is the alternative that is carried forward to the Revised Forest Plan.

Alternative A

Alternative A would be a continuation of the current Land and Resource Management Plan for the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, as amended. This Forest Plan was signed in July 1986 and has been amended 13 times. This alternative reflects how the current Plan is being implemented as a result of policy changes, budgets, and personnel. Management activities were designed to improve the age-class distribution in all forest types and provide a balanced market and non-market resource program to maintain a broad geographic distribution of socio-economic benefits. A good distribution of age classes was proposed while maintaining a vigorous forest condition that produced increases in high-quality sawtimber and other timber products.

This alternative provides opportunities for developed and dispersed recreation experiences, for the maintenance of an optimum population of game and non-game species, and protection of sensitive species.

Alternative B

Alternative B concentrates on opportunities that provide good economic returns while benefiting local communities. Timber management would provide a sustained yield of wood products emphasizing high-quality sawtimber from high-site land and providing high economic returns. Vegetation would be actively managed to reduce risk and threats associated with forest pests especially in areas related to tourism or high-value timber.

Developed and dispersed recreation opportunities and high-quality scenery would be provided in a variety of settings that benefit tourism. This alternative shifts from traditional recreation opportunities toward increasing day-use, sightseeing, and trail opportunities. Developed recreation focuses on high-use, high-value sites providing the greatest tourism benefits. Public access (travel-ways, use corridors, trails-including OHV trails) would be maintained in high-use, low-cost areas.

Alternative C

Alternative C is biologically driven with an emphasis on restoration of vegetation to a reference (pre-settlement) condition based on the ecological potential and capability of the land. When possible, natural processes are mimicked in a landscape pattern. Restoration activities would produce both large and small openings. Prescribed fire, wildland fire use, and timber harvesting are used to restore natural ecosystem processes and maintain fire dependent communities. Timber production results from management to restore and maintain natural processes, communities, and wildlife habitats. Timber sales would facilitate resource goals.

A wide variety of recreation opportunities are provided. Developed and dispersed recreation show increases, especially activities in support of restoration and ecosystem management. Terrestrial, riparian, and aquatic ecosystems would be maintained.

Alternative D

The emphasis of Alternative D would be to reach and maintain balanced age classes on pine and hardwood forest types. All suitable lands would be available for sustained yield management. On suitable lands, each of the major forest groups would have a specific target "rotation age" or age at which it would be harvested and replanted with the same forest group. Insects, diseases, and exotic plant and animal species on suitable lands are actively controlled and prevented.

Access would be developed, maintained, and used as needed to meet the goal of balanced age classes, wildlife habitats, and production of timber products. Developed and dispersed recreation opportunities are provided in a variety of settings that are both natural and managed.

FINDINGS RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND AUTHORITIES

I have considered the statutes governing management of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, and I believe that this decision represents the best approach to both harmonizing and reconciling the current statutory duties of the Forest Service.

Clean Air Act

As discussed in the FEIS, Chapter 3, "Air Resources," all lands managed by the Forests are currently in attainment with National Ambient Air Quality Standards. Compliance with air quality statutes is directed in the Forest Plan, Chapter 2, "Soil, Water, and Air."

Clean Water Act

The Revised Forest Plan contains direction to ensure all projects comply with the requirements of the Clean Water Act. This direction is found in the Forest Plan, Chapter 2, "Watershed Function," and Chapter 2, Management Area 3.I Riparian Corridors. Analysis of sediment yields and cumulative effects for water quality and associated beneficial uses are discussed in the FEIS, Chapter 3, "Watersheds, Streams, and Water Resources."

National Historic Preservation Act

In accordance with a Memorandum of Understanding with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, Forest Plans are not undertakings under the National Historic Preservation Act. Consultation pursuant to Section 106 of the Act is not required at the Forest Plan level. As discussed in the "Heritage Resource" section of Chapter 3 of the FEIS, activities in the Forest Plan will be in compliance with the Act. Conformance with the Act is directed in the Forest Plan in Chapter 2, "Heritage Resources." Additional direction is provided in FSM 2360.

Endangered Species Act

This decision is made with the benefit of extensive consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the Revised Forest Plan and FEIS. The USFWS was a partner in completing species viability assessments and helping develop wildlife habitat objectives. They were provided advance copies of the Revised Forest Plan, FEIS and the Biological Assessment (BA). Their recommendations were included in the Revised Forest Plan. The BA assessed effects to federally-designated proposed, threatened, or endangered (PET) species that occur or could occur on the Forests. The USFWS Biological Opinion (BO) concurred in the determination of effects described in the BA and FEIS and determined that national forest management actions were "not likely to jeopardize the continued existence" of the American burying beetle, the only species for which the Forest Service made a determination of "Likely to Adversely Affect," provided USFWS protocols were followed. The BO also concurred that implementation of Alternative E of the Forest Plan Revision is "not likely to adversely affect" any of the other federally-listed endangered or threatened species or their habitats. Further consultation with USFWS will be part of site-specific evaluations for project-level decisions.

SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS

The following documents contain environmental analyses and assessments that are not repeated in this FEIS, but provide supporting documentation for some of the forest plan decisions.

- *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Suppression of the Southern Pine Beetle* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region 1987)

- ▶ *Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Ozark-Ouachita Mountain* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region 1990)
- ▶ *Final Environmental Impact Statement, Wild and Scenic River Study Report on Thirteen Rivers in the Ozark National Forest* (USDA Forest Service, Ozark National Forest 1991)
- ▶ *Ozark-Ouachita Highlands Assessment* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region 1999)
- ▶ *Southern Resource Assessment* (USDA Forest Service, Southern Region 2002)

IMPLEMENTATION

The direction in this Revised Forest Plan will become effective 30 days after the publication of the Notice of Availability (NOA) of the Final Environmental Impact Statement in the Federal Register [36 CFR 219.10(c)(1), 1982 version].

Forest Plans are permissive in that they allow, but do not mandate, the occurrence of certain activities. Following the applicable NEPA procedures, site-specific analysis of proposed activities will determine what can be accomplished. The outputs specified in the Revised Forest Plan are only estimates and projections based on available information, inventory data, and assumptions.

Transition to the Revised Forest Plan

Revised Forest Plan direction will apply to all projects for which decisions are made on or after the implementation date of this Record of Decision.

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) requires that "permits, contracts, and other instruments for the use and occupancy" of National Forest System lands be "consistent" with the current Land and Resource Management Plan [16 U.S.C. 1604(i)]. In the context of a Revised Forest Plan, NFMA specifically qualifies this requirement in three ways: 1) these documents must be revised only "when necessary", 2) these documents must be revised "as soon as practicable", and 3) any revisions are "subject to valid existing rights."

There are many management actions that have decisions made before the effective date of this ROD. These pre-existing actions were considered part of the baseline in developing the Revised Forest Plan. The projected effects of these actions are part of the cumulative effects analyses documented in the FEIS and BA for the Revised Plan. That analysis shows that the continued implementation of these previously decided actions would not foreclose the ability to meet the desired conditions, goals, and objectives of this Revised Forest Plan. With this information and exercising my discretion under NFMA, I have determined that it is not necessary to apply the Revised Plan's direction retroactively.

Specifically, I have decided not to modify any agency actions involving timber sale contracts. These actions will be implemented according to the terms of the timber sale contract and their effects were disclosed in the FEIS to the Revised Forest Plan. Existing timber sale contracts will, in most cases, be completed within three years. However, should the need arise, the Forest Supervisor has the discretion to modify timber sale contracts to bring them into compliance with the Revised Forest Plan.

Likewise, I have decided not to modify any agency actions involving permits, non-timber sale contracts, or other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands. These actions will be implemented according to the terms of the applicable instrument and their effects were disclosed in the FEIS to the Revised Forest Plan. However, should the need arise, the Forest Supervisor has the discretion to modify these permits, non-timber sale contracts, or other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands to bring them into compliance with the Revised Forest Plan. After approval of the Revised Plan, the Forest Supervisor shall ensure that future permits, contracts, and other instruments for the use and occupancy of the affected National Forest System lands will be consistent with the Revised Plan.

Projects Approved or Initiated under the 1986 Forest Plan

Timber Sales

- ▶ Existing agency actions involving timber sale contracts **need not** be modified; they will be implemented according to the terms of the timber sale contract. Should the need arise, the Forest Supervisor has the discretion to modify timber sale contracts to bring them into compliance with the Revised Forest Plan.
- ▶ New timber sale contracts (offered after the effective date) based on decisions signed prior to the effective date **may** be offered and implemented as called for in the NEPA documentation.
- ▶ New timber sale contracts based on decisions signed after the effective date **will be consistent** with direction in the Revised Forest Plan. Consistency is documented when the Responsible Official signs the Gate 2 documentation for the sale.

Permits, Non-Timber Sale Contracts, Occupancy and Use

- ▶ Agency actions involving existing permits, non-timber sale contracts, or other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands **need not** be modified; these actions will be implemented according to the terms of the applicable instrument. Should the need arise, the Forest Supervisor has the discretion to modify these permits, contracts, or other instruments to bring them into compliance with the Revised Forest Plan.
- ▶ Future permits, contracts, and other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands based on decisions signed prior to the effective date **may** be offered and implemented as called for in the NEPA documentation.
- ▶ Future permits, contracts, and other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands **will be consistent** with the Revised Forest Plan if the decision was signed on or after the effective date.

Agency Implemented Resource Actions

- ▶ All other agency resource management actions based on decisions signed prior to the effective date **may** be implemented as called for in the NEPA documentation.
- ▶ Actions based on decisions signed after the effective date **will be consistent** with the Revised Forest Plan direction and consistency documented in the decision.

MONITORING

Forest Plan monitoring and evaluation (M&E) measures accompany many plan components in Chapters 1 and 2. Monitoring adherence to the design criteria (standards) in Chapter 3 will be achieved through many diverse activities, including but not limited to contract compliance inspections, implementation monitoring reviews of selected projects, individual specialist reviews of project compliance with particular sets of standards, health and safety inspections (of buildings, bridges, etc), and interdisciplinary reviews of selected environmental assessments (EAs).

This Forest Plan does not specify particular protocols for each element of the monitoring program. Such protocols are well established for most monitoring elements; however, protocols are subject to change as new findings emerge, new technologies become available, and/or partnerships with other agencies and organizations produce improved methods or procedures for monitoring. Specific monitoring protocols are defined in the task sheets, which are detailed and specific. Monitoring elements and task sheets may be modified and prioritized to guide monitoring activities over the course of forest plan implementation.

Monitoring information will be evaluated and used to update inventory data, improve current and future mitigation measures, and assess the need to change the Forest Plan. Evaluation of monitoring results will help the Forest Supervisor respond to changing conditions, emerging trends, public concerns, and new information and technology. No single monitoring item or parameter will automatically trigger a change in Forest Plan direction. An interdisciplinary approach will be used to evaluate information and decide what changes are needed.

AMENDING THE REVISED FOREST PLAN

The accomplishment of plan implementation activities, many of which are interdependent, may be affected by annual budgets. However, the priorities, objectives, standards, management areas, and monitoring elements described in the Revised Plan may not change unless the Plan is amended. The need to amend the plan may result from factors including, but not limited to:

- ▶ Recommendations of an interdisciplinary team based on monitoring and evaluation results.
- ▶ Determinations by the Forest Supervisor that existing or proposed projects, permits, contracts, cooperating agreements, or other instruments authorizing occupancy and use are appropriate, but not consistent with elements of the Plan's management direction.
- ▶ Administrative appeal decisions or planning errors found during plan implementation.
- ▶ Changes in physical, biological, social, or economic conditions.

Forest Plans are normally revised on a 10-year cycle with anticipated completion of the revision occurring 10 to 15 years after plan approval. However, the amendment process provides the flexibility to adapt the decisions made today to the realities of tomorrow. There will be opportunities for the public and other interested parties to be involved in any future changes to the Revised Plan.

APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is subject to administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR 217. A written appeal of this decision must be filed in duplicate within 90 days of the date of the published legal notices.

For filing an appeal through regular mail:

USDA Forest Service
Attn: EMC Appeals
Mail Stop 1104
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250-1104

For filing an appeal using FedEx, UPS, Courier:

USDA Forest Service
Ecosystem Management Coordination
Attn: Appeals
Yates Bldg., 3CEN
201 14th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20024

For questions concerning the appeal process contact:

USDA Forest Service
Attn: Ecosystem Management Coordination (Steve Segovia)
Yates Bldg., 3CEN
201 14th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20250
202-205-1066

Any Notice of Appeal must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 217.9 and include at a minimum:

- ▶ A statement that the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR part 217.
- ▶ The name, address, and telephone number of the appellant.
- ▶ Identification of the decision to which the appeal is being made.
- ▶ Identification of the document in which the decision is contained, by title and subject, date of the decision, and name and title of the Deciding Officer.
- ▶ Identification of the specific portion of the decision to which appeal is made.
- ▶ The reasons for appeal, including issues of fact, law, regulation, or policy and, if applicable, specifically how the decision violates law, regulation, or policy.
- ▶ Identification of the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks.

Recommendations for special designations such as additions to the National Wilderness or National Wild and Scenic River System are preliminary administrative recommendations that will receive further review and possible modification by the Chief of the Forest Service, the Secretary of Agriculture, and/or the President of the United States. The Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness and wild and scenic river designations; therefore, wilderness and wild and scenic river recommendations in the

Revised Forest Plan are not appealable under the agency's administrative appeal procedures. [36 CFR 217.4(c)]

Requests to stay implementation of the Forest Plan will not be granted [36 CFR 217.10(a)].

Final decisions on proposed projects will be made on a site-specific basis using appropriate analysis and documentation and in compliance with NEPA. Project decisions may be subject to appeal at that time. For questions concerning the appeal process, contact:

USDA Forest Service
Attn: Ecosystem Management Coordination (Steve Segovia)
Yates Bldg., 3CEN
201 14th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20250
202-205-1066

For questions concerning the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Plan, contact:

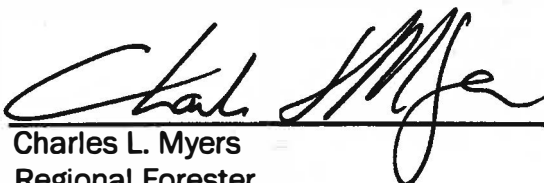
Michael Sanders
Forest Supervisor
Ozark-St. Francis National Forests
605 West Main Street
Russellville, AR 72801
479-968-2354

Reviewers are encouraged to contact the Forest Supervisor before submitting appeals to determine if misunderstandings or concerns can be clarified or resolved.

APPROVAL

I am pleased to announce my decision and bring this phase of forest planning to completion. This Forest Plan has been built on a strong foundation of citizen collaboration and the best available science.

As we move forward, we will carefully monitor our activities, the condition of the land, the goods and services produced, and the effectiveness of the resource protection measures included in the Revised Forest Plan. I anticipate that implementation of the plan will be conducted in the same spirit of partnership that has characterized this revision process. Working together, we can meet the challenges, realize the opportunities, and achieve the priorities and objectives of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Revised Land and Resource Management Plan.



Charles L. Myers
Regional Forester
Southern Region
USDA Forest Service

Date: September 23, 2005