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Dear Interested Public:

The Sylamore Ranger District (the District) of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests (the Forest) has developed a proposed action for the **Ramsey Knob Project**; it involves commercial timber harvests, timber stand improvement and reforestation activities, hazardous fuels reduction activities, road and access management activities and activities to enhance or improve wildlife habitat. The purpose of this letter is to inform potentially interested parties of what is being proposed and to solicit comments. Your involvement will enable us to better assess concerns of the public and may help identify environmental issues associated with implementation of proposed activities.

Location of the Proposed Project Area

The Sylamore Ranger District is located in north-central Arkansas approximately 64 air miles north of Little Rock, AR and 25 air miles south of the Arkansas-Missouri line. The District manages National Forest System land totaling approximately 133,500 acres, mostly lying within Stone and Baxter Counties.

The proposed project area is located in the southwest portion of the District within Compartments 56, 57 and 101 as shown on the attached map. Management activities are being proposed on approximately 3,957 acres of National Forest System land within Sections 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, and 12, T.15N, R. 13W and Sections 6 and 7, T. 15N, R.12W in Stone County, AR. **No activities are being proposed on private land.**

Purpose of and Need for Management

The Forest Service is legislatively mandated to manage the natural resources of the National Forests for the multiple use and sustained yield of the products and services. The Revised Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) guides all natural resource management activities for the Forest; it is posted on the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/oonf/ozark/projects/planning/planning.html>. The entire proposed project area lies within Management Area 3.C: *Mixed Forest* (Forest Plan, pp 2-61 and 2-62); it was examined by Forest Service resource specialists who identified management needs for this area based on the goals established by the Forest Plan.

The purpose of this project would be to work toward achieving the desired future conditions for the Forest as outlined in the Forest Plan through management actions that would 1.) improve the health and vigor of the Forest, 2.) reduce the potential for catastrophic damage from wildfire, 3.) improve the transportation system, 4.) reduce sediment production from system roads, 5.) enhance and improve wildlife habitat conditions, 6.) provide for a sustained flow of goods and services, and 7.) provide economic benefits to the local area.



Vegetation Management

In general, the desired conditions for major forest communities are that they are healthy and diverse, relatively resistant to major outbreaks of insects and disease that cause widespread tree mortality and at low risk from catastrophic wildfire. Priorities outlined in the Forest Plan for vegetation and forest health and for commodities on the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests direct resource managers to

- improve forest health by reducing the likelihood of insect infestations, disease outbreaks and establishment of non-native invasive species on National Forest System lands;
- manage major forest communities to achieve desired conditions and sustained flows of goods and services;
- provide a stable supply of wood products within the historic National Forest market area, and
- provide a non-declining yield of forest products consistent with the land's capability and suitability while protecting other resource values.

Within the forested areas of the proposed project area, needs to create a more diverse range of age class distribution and to reduce competing vegetation while promoting management species have been identified.

The Culmination of Mean Annual Increment (CMAI) is the point where the maximum mean annual increase in volume of timber is reached; after this point, annual growth, potential for seed production and resilience to insect infestation, disease outbreaks, and other environmental stressors gradually decreases. The proposed project area contains large contiguous blocks of forest that have passed the age of CMAI and are declining in health and vigor. Natural regeneration in these areas occurs under full canopies where it does not receive adequate sunlight to thrive or in small gaps created by the losses of individual trees or groups of trees from natural causes. Under these conditions, a gradual shift in species composition toward more shade tolerant species is likely to occur; the shift would be less gradual if a catastrophic loss event occurred.

The growth of species being promoted on approximately 1,438 of the proposed project area acres suitable for timber management is being suppressed by competing vegetation. Resources necessary for growth (light, water, nutrients and space above and below ground) are limited in any given area, and when crowded growing conditions exist, stand health and vigor as well as the potential for seed production are negatively affected. As the forest matures, stand structure, quality and species composition will be affected; the desired conditions and objectives outlined in the Forest Plan are not likely to be achieved.

Hazardous Fuels

Fire programs on the Forest are managed to improve condition class, forest health and ecosystem viability over the long term. Fire regime and condition class designations on the Forest have been determined through collaborative efforts between the Forest Service and other agencies. The Sylamore Ranger District falls under the Fire Regime One classification indicating that

historically, this area experienced low-severity fires with a frequency of 0 to 35 years. Fire regime condition classes (FRCC) delineate a standardized, interagency index to measure the departure of current conditions from reference (historical) conditions. FRCC is composed of three classes: FRCC I (within the natural/historical range of variability), FRCC II (moderate departure from the reference fire regime) and FRCC III (high departure from the reference fire regime). The Sylamore Ranger District has a FRCC III designation indicating that the risk of losing key ecosystem components is high in the event of a wildfire.

The existing fuels load of the proposed project area is approximately 1.8 to 4.0 tons per acre. Additional fuels are constantly being added through natural processes; if they continue to accumulate and a wildfire occurs, conditions will be more hazardous for firefighters and severe damage to natural resources and rural property will be even more likely to occur. There is a need to reduce the fuels load and to maintain it at reduced levels to limit the potential for the catastrophic loss from a wildfire.

Road and Access Management

The desired condition for transportation and public access on the National Forest is a minimum network of open roads that responds to public needs, is efficient to manage and is safe, affordable and environmentally sound. Forest Plan priorities established for management of the transportation system include

- planning, designing, constructing and maintaining the road and trail system to meet those objectives established to implement the Forest Plan, to promote sustainable resource conditions, and to safely accommodate anticipated levels and types of use and
- development and operation of the minimum road system, including all bridges and culverts, and maintaining the system to standards needed to meet requirements of proposed actions, protect the environment and provide for reasonable public access.

The Forest Plan also provides direction to identify roads and trails that should be reconstructed or decommissioned to reduce sediment and improve watershed condition. Forest-wide, the number of unnecessary or redundant unauthorized roads and the miles of road under Forest Service maintenance are to be reduced. (Forest-wide objectives OBJ.49, OBJ.50 and OBJ.53 respectively)

At present, many of the Forest Development Roads (FDRs) within the proposed project area do not meet agency design standards and will not sustain continued current levels and types of use. Poor drainage systems, numerous creek crossings, lack of adequate surface material, and encroaching vegetation have created conditions that limit vehicle access for both public and administrative use and contribute to sediment loads through erosion.

To bring the proposed project area's transportation infrastructure to agency standard approximately 9.65 miles of road would require reconstruction (including minor realignment of some road segments), and maintenance would be needed on approximately 20.95 miles of road. There are also needs to reduce the potential for impacts to soil and water resources caused by erosion and to wildlife caused by motorized disturbance.

Wildlife Habitat

The desired conditions for plant and animal species on the National Forest are those that provide for diverse, high quality habitats that will support viable populations of all native and desirable nonnative species. Conditions should support an abundance of game species that are commonly hunted to provide high levels of quality hunting opportunities.

The current state of wildlife habitat in the proposed project area does not meet nor will it lead toward the desired conditions as outlined in the Forest Plan.

The number of permanent water sources for wildlife in the proposed project area does not meet the Forest Plan standard (FW35) for dry uplands. Six additional water sources would be required to bring the area into compliance with this standard. Ponds in the proposed project area need maintenance to ensure that adequate holding capacity is retained.

There is a lack of grassy habitat in the proposed project area. The number of wildlife openings within the proposed project area does not meet the Forest Plan standard (FW34) for distribution of this habitat type. At least five additional openings between 1 and 5 acres each are needed to satisfy this requirement. Past maintenance of the existing wildlife openings in the proposed project area has not been sufficient to maintain optimal conditions for foraging wildlife. Two existing wildlife openings (3.8 acres total) would require reconstruction and subsequent maintenance to restore and maintain their value for wildlife. A small inclusion (originally 1.3 acres) in Compartment 101 stand 20 which was once a cleared wildlife opening has grown up in hardwoods and is no longer functioning as such; access to this site with the types of equipment necessary to effectively restore and maintain it is difficult. Maintenance activities need to be conducted in seven established openings (13.7 total acres) to keep them in an open condition.

Approximately 127 acres in Compartment 101 stands 10 and 34 (the east side of Boardtree Hollow) have characteristics of the Dry Oak Forest and Woodland community type (Forest Plan pages 1-20 through 1-22), but are not presently being managed to ensure this habitat type is maintained. Historically, dry oak forests were open woods with a sparse midstory and a diverse herbaceous understory, created and maintained by periodic fire and grazing. Oak species in this forest community type generally never develop full form, being stunted from growing in poor soils with little moisture. This portion of the proposed project area is sparsely covered with older post oak, black oak, and white oak; many of these trees show poor form caused by growing in the dry, rocky soil found here. Black gum and other species have become established in this area due to the lack of fire.

At present, vehicles can access almost any of the established wildlife openings in the proposed project area. This can cause wildlife to abandon improved habitat that they need to thrive, and it increases potential for poaching.

The Proposed Action

To address the aforementioned needs an interdisciplinary team of Forest Service resource specialists developed the following Proposed Action for integrated resource management of the Ramsey Knob Project area; it responds to priorities and standards outlined in the Forest Plan to

help move the area towards the desired conditions described therein, and it contributes toward meeting Forest-wide objectives. If approved, implementation of this project would most likely occur between 2009 and 2020, and it would be conducted in compliance with all federal, state and local laws, regulations or requirements and the standards of the Forest Plan.

Table 1 provides a summary of the activities being proposed; a brief description of these activities is provided following the table. Different treatments within many of the same stands would be conducted over the 10-year timeframe identified for this project.

Table 1:
Summary of the Activities Proposed for the Ramsey Knob Project

All acreage and mileage figures are approximate.

<u>Proposed Activity:</u>	<u>Total Acreage or Mileage:</u>
Vegetation Management Activities	
Seedtree harvest (pine); chemical herbicide* site preparation for planting; burning site preparation for planting; pine planting; two (2) release treatments with saws and/or chemical herbicide*; seedtree final removal harvest; pre-commercial thinning with saws and/or chemical herbicide*	201 acres within Compartments 56 & 57
Shelterwood harvest (hardwood); chemical herbicide* site preparation for natural regeneration; burning site preparation for natural regeneration; hardwood planting if natural regeneration is not adequate; two (2) release treatments with saws and/or chemical herbicide*; shelterwood final removal harvest; pre-commercial thinning with saws and/or chemical herbicide*	168 acres within Compartments 56, 57 & 101
Shelterwood Removal harvest (hardwood); pre-commercial thinning with saws and/or chemical herbicide*; prescribed burning to control understory vegetation	32 acres within Compartment 57
Commercial thinning harvest; prescribed burning to control understory vegetation <i>NOTE: Two (2) burns would be conducted for understory vegetation control</i>	542 acres within Compartments 56, 57 & 101
Commercial thinning harvest; chemical herbicide* application and prescribed burning to control understory vegetation	299 acres within Compartments 57 & 101

Table 1 (continued):

Summary of the Activities Proposed for the Ramsey Knob Project

All acreage and mileage figures are approximate.

Proposed Activity:

Total Acreage or Mileage:

Vegetation Management Activities (continued)

Pre-commercial thinning with saws and/or chemical herbicide*; prescribed burning to control understory vegetation 234 acres within Compartments 56, 57 & 101

Pre-commercial thinning with saws and/or chemical herbicide* 6 acres within Compartment 57

Chemical herbicide* application and prescribed burning to control understory vegetation 363 acres within Compartments 56, 57 & 101

Hazardous Fuel Reduction Activities

Landscape-scale burning on a 3 to 5 year return interval with mechanical treatments (shredding, felling with saws or piling and burning) as warranted 3,957 acres of National Forest System land within Compartments 56, 57 and 101

Road Management Activities

Road reconstruction 9.65 miles total
Maintenance Level 1: 1.45 mile
Maintenance Level 3: 3.60 miles
Maintenance Level 4: 4.60 miles

Road maintenance 20.95 miles
Maintenance Level 1: 14.35 miles
Maintenance Level 2: 5.60 miles
Maintenance Level 3: 1.00 mile

Road closures with installation of gates for protection of soil and water resources 14.15 miles of Maintenance Level 1 road blocked

Road closures with installation of gates to block unauthorized vehicular access to wildlife openings 4.6 miles total blocked
Maintenance Level 1: 2.25 miles
Maintenance Level 2: 2.35 miles

Decommissioning roads 2.75 miles decommissioned and removed from the system inventory

Temporary road construction In suitable locations if needed

Activities to Enhance or Improve Wildlife Habitat

Pond maintenance as needed 5 ponds within Compartments 56 & 101

Table 1 (continued):

Summary of the Activities Proposed for the Ramsey Knob Project

All acreage and mileage figures are approximate.

Proposed Activity:

Total Acreage or Mileage:

Activities to Enhance or Improve Wildlife Habitat (continued)

Pond construction and subsequent maintenance as needed	6 ponds within Compartments 56, 57 & 101
Wildlife opening reconstruction and subsequent maintenance as needed (includes a potential for the use of chemical herbicide*)	2 openings (3.8 acres total) within Compartments 57 & 101
Wildlife opening maintenance as needed (includes a potential for the use of chemical herbicide*)	7 openings (13.7 acres) within Compartments 56 & 57
Wildlife opening construction with subsequent maintenance as needed (includes a potential for the use of chemical herbicide*)	5 openings (12.6 acres) within Compartments 56 & 101
Management of a Dry Oak Forest Community through a commercial thinning harvest; chemical herbicide* application to control understory vegetation; prescribed burning on a 2 to 7 year return interval; planting wildlife habitat grasses and forbs if needed	127 acres within Compartment 101
Gate placement to block unauthorized vehicular access to a wildlife opening	One gate would be placed across the access point between Roasting Ear Road and a wildlife opening alongside it (Compartment 101); this access is not a system road, and the gate would not prevent the vehicular use of Roasting Ear Road.

**NOTE: Chemical herbicides proposed for TSI activities and spot treatment of non-native invasive species include either glyphosate, triclopyr or a triclopyr with imazapyr mix. Glyphosate may be used to treat saplings in wildlife openings.*

A description of the management activities being proposed is provided in the following paragraphs.

Vegetation Management Activities

Silvicultural treatments including timber harvests, timber stand improvement (TSI) and reforestation activities would be utilized to improve and protect forest health and vigor and to

move the existing condition toward the desired future condition for the Forest. These treatments would create and maintain a mosaic of ages and conditions that are more resilient to potential impacts of insect and disease outbreaks, wildfire or other environmental stressors than the existing condition. These activities would also contribute toward maintaining a sustainable flow of goods and services consistent with the land's capability and suitability, provide economic benefits to the local area, reduce available fuel, and improve conditions for wildlife through the establishment of early seral habitat and an increased potential for mast and seed production.

Timber harvests would be conducted either for stand regeneration (seedtree and shelterwood harvests) or to improve growing conditions for residual stems (commercial thinning harvests).

The TSI treatments proposed for this project would be conducted to increase the potential for seedling establishment, survival and growth, to control vegetation suppressing the growth of the species being promoted, or to limit the potential for the establishment or spread of non-native invasive species. These activities include site preparation through chemical herbicide application and/or burning, control of understory vegetation with chemical herbicide application or saws, release with chemical herbicide application or saws and pre-commercial thinning with chemical herbicide application or saws.

The chemical herbicides that would be used to conduct TSI work include glyphosate, triclopyr (triethylamine [TEA] formulation), or a triclopyr TEA and imazapyr mix. They would be applied at the lowest effective rate to achieve project objectives and according to label specifications. All aspects of herbicide use would be monitored. A cut-surface herbicide application method would be used; the stems of target species would be cut and a small amount of herbicide would be applied directly to the cambial area of the stump. Target vegetation for this project essentially includes all species (except threatened, endangered or sensitive plant species) that are competing with selected stems. Small stems (approximately ½ inch or less in diameter) of native species would not be treated to ensure continued diversity within these stands. Any non-native invasive plant species that are identified within the proposed project area would be treated. Herbicide application for TSI activities would be performed by a licensed contractor under the supervision of a Forest Contracting Officer's Representative who would ensure compliance with contracted terms and applicable Forest Plan forest-wide and management area standards (Forest Plan, Part 3). Treated areas would be inspected during the growing season to determine the efficacy of the herbicide application. If needed, additional herbicide application may be required to achieve the desired result (mortality of treated stems). The cumulative amount of herbicide applied per acre would not exceed labeled application rate limits.

Low intensity TSI burning would be conducted in either the dormant season or early growing season.

Shortleaf pine seedlings would be planted following seedtree harvests and site preparation activities; hardwood seedlings would be planted following shelterwood harvests and site preparation activities if acceptable stocking levels identified in Forest Plan standard FW11 are not achieved through natural means. Planting would help to ensure the re-establishment of a

similar species composition in stands committed to regeneration and would provide an opportunity to select superior seedlings.

Implementation monitoring through harvest and contract inspections would be conducted by a certified timber sale administrator and contract inspectors to ensure compliance with applicable Forest Plan standards.

Hazardous Fuel Reduction Activities

Physical setting, weather and fuels combine to determine wildfire intensity and severity. Of these three factors, fuel is the only one that can be treated. Fuel treatments cannot guarantee benign fire behavior, but they can reduce the probability that extreme fire behavior will occur. Wildfires that burn into areas where fuels have been reduced cause less natural resource damage and are much easier to bring under control than those which burn into areas that have not received fuel reduction treatments.

The Forest Plan calls for the use of a combination of prescribed burning, mechanical and vegetation treatments to lower the risk of catastrophic wildfire and restore fire-adapted ecological communities. To reduce the hazardous fuel load of the proposed project area, mechanical treatments, piling and burning treatments and low-intensity burning would be conducted individually or in combination. The resulting reduced fuels load would be maintained through low-intensity burns on a 3 to 7 year cycle as warranted by accumulated fuel loads.

In areas where ladder fuels (those that provide vertical continuity between the ground and tree crowns) need to be reduced, understory stems would either be felled with chainsaws or mechanically shredded or chipped using a skid-steer shredder.

Piling and burning involves piling heavy concentrations of slash resulting from logging, thinning for wildlife or fuel management activities, allowing the slash to dry out and burning it during wet periods of the year.

Low-intensity burning would be conducted on approximately 3,957 acres of National Forest System lands within Compartments 56, 57 and 101 during either the dormant or early growing season to reduce 50 to 80 percent of the existing litter layer and up to 50 percent of the understory (1, 10 and 100 hour fuels); the majority of the duff layer would remain intact. All burning activities proposed for this project (hazardous fuel reduction, silvicultural treatments, and wildlife habitat maintenance) would

- follow the guidelines of the Arkansas Forestry Commission's Smoke Management Program (SMP),
- be conducted according to a prescribed burning plan developed specifically for this project, and
- be monitored to ensure project design and smoke management activities are properly executed.

The SMP is available at http://www.forestry.state.ar.us/manage/smoke_management.pdf . It guides prescribed fire managers to minimize the impact of particulate matter released into the

atmosphere by estimating how many tons of fuel may be burned in an airshed (36 square miles centered over the area to be burned) based upon the ability of the atmosphere to disperse the particulate matter and the distance downwind to a smoke-sensitive area. SMP guidelines include notifying the Arkansas Forestry Commission's Dispatch Center which coordinates prescribed fire activities and performance of a smoke dispersion modeling analysis prior to ignition. If the fuel tonnage for a prescribed fire within a given air shed exceeds permissible limits, the AFC Dispatch Center will recommend to the prescribed fire manager that the burn either be delayed or the planned acreage to be burned be reduced. Burning operations would not be conducted if the smoke dispersion modeling analysis indicates that smoke sensitive targets may be impacted or on days declared by the National Weather Service as Ozone Action Days. Smoke sensitive targets identified at this time for this project include Highway 341, Highway 14 and the communities of Mountain View, Fifty-Six and Calico Rock, AR.

A prescribed burn plan would be prepared specifically for this project. It will establish the acceptable parameters within which burning operations may be conducted. It would include appropriate meteorological conditions, smoke management activities, public and firefighter safety, public notification requirements, protections for adjacent public and private facilities, logistics, equipment and personnel needed, and organizational structure.

The total area will be divided into smaller blocks which may be burned over a period of several days. This work would be accomplished using existing roads and natural barriers for prescribed fire control lines, and where necessary, constructing new prescribed fire control lines using hand tools or mechanized equipment (bull dozer). It is estimated that construction of up to seven miles of new prescribed fire control line with a bull dozer may be necessary to conduct this operation. No prescribed fire control line would be constructed with a dozer on slopes greater than 50-60 percent slopes. Prescribed fire control lines would be bladed and seeded when prescribed burning operations are completed to speed recovery of soil productivity and to reduce the potential for erosion.

The perimeter of the burn units would be ignited by hand; the interior of burn units may be ignited by hand, flare gun or aerial ignition. Prior to ignition, a contingency plan would be in place outlining actions to immediately address 1) any change in meteorological conditions that fall outside the appropriate parameters or 2) spotting outside the burn area. Fire would be allowed to back down from ridge-tops into hollows and drains; a vegetated buffer would be maintained along perennial streams as directed by Forest Plan standards. Unburned leaf litter and duff would act as a filter strip during rains to protect riparian areas and water quality.

On the day of a burn, signs would be placed along public roads to warn the public of potentially smoky conditions. Should visibility along any road become impaired, pilot cars may be utilized to lead vehicles through or the road may be temporarily closed. Burning activities would generally be completed by mid-afternoon so that most smoke is dispersed by nightfall.

Depending on slope, position and tree height, existing snags and some live trees within 50 – 100 feet of the burn perimeters may need to be felled in advance of the burn date in order to prevent the burn from escaping and to facilitate safety of prescribed burn personnel; other trees along the perimeter may need to be felled during and immediately after the burn for the same reasons.

Road and Access Management Activities

Road reconstruction and maintenance are being proposed to bring system roads within the proposed Ramsey Knob Project area up to current Forest Service design standards, to reduce the potential for impacts caused by erosion and to improve public and administrative access.

To remove hydrologic or erosion hazards, road reconstruction is being proposed on the entire lengths of five roads (5.65 miles) and on a 4.0 mile portion of FDR 1106 (Roasting Ear Road). Reconstruction activities that would be utilized on each of these roads are identified below, but may also include the following if deemed necessary: upgrading drainage systems (ditching, culverts and waterbars, etc.), reconstruction of drainage crossings, resurfacing, repair of eroded areas, improvement of highway approaches, signing and removal of encroaching vegetation. Minor road relocation or realignment may be necessary to correct drainage or erosion problems and minor blasting to remove material that cannot be removed by mechanical means may also be required.

- FDR 1129C and 1129 D are both short spur roads (0.3 miles each) connecting FDR 1106 to a paved county road. Most likely, only one of these roads would actually be reconstructed. FDR 1106 serves as the only road access for much of the southwestern corner of the District. A 4.0 mile section of this road cuts through the center of the proposed project area and serves as a boundary between the three compartments. These roads need surfacing materials, improved ditching and culvert installation to facilitate drainage. Minor realignment in areas to improve road sustainability may also be necessary.
- FDR 1134 begins at an intersection with FDR 1106 and goes west for 3.6 miles. It serves as the northern boundary and the only road access for compartment 101. Along with surfacing, the road needs drainage ditches, rolling dips and culverts to facilitate drainage. The eastern end of this road parallels a portion of Roasting Ear Creek where the bank has begun to slough away. Minor road realignment would most likely be necessary to reduce the potential for road failure and to reduce the potential for impacts to water quality.
- FDR 91101K begins at an intersection with FDR 1134 and heads south for 1.2 miles paralleling Boardtree Hollow. FDR 91056F intersects FDR 1106 and continues west for 0.25 mile. Drainage needs to be improved on both roads, and minor road realignment of some areas to improve road sustainability may also be needed.

Maintenance activities would be conducted on approximately 20.95 miles of roads within the project area compartments to keep them in a condition that would sustain current and anticipated use and provide for public safety. These activities include blading, addition of gravel, removal of encroaching vegetation (including incidental green or hazardous trees), pulling ditches, slide removal, slump repair, and installation of structures to facilitate drainage.

To reduce length of skid trails and subsequently reduce the potential for damage from rutting or compaction of soil resources in harvest areas, temporary roads may be constructed in stands lacking immediate access to haul roads. Incidental green tree removal for temporary road clearing may be required. Following the completion of the proposed silvicultural treatments, temporary roads would be obliterated, seeded and fertilized to encourage natural recovery

processes and minimize the potential for erosion. Rehabilitated temporary roads and skid trails that are adjacent to open roads would also be blocked so that they are not mistaken for open side roads.

To decrease the need for continued maintenance, reduce the potential for erosion and contributions to sediment loads, and to protect wildlife from vehicular disturbance, four maintenance level 2 and forty-four maintenance level 1 roads (approximately 18.75 miles total) would be blocked through installation of gates. (*Maintenance level 1 roads are only designed to sustain infrequent administrative use to conduct resource management and were never intended to sustain or to be maintained for continuous use. Maintenance level 2 roads are designed for use by high clearance vehicles.*) After gates are installed, authorized motorized use would be limited.

FDR 1154 (0.75 mile) and a two mile portion of FDR 1120 (which lies just outside the proposed project area) would be decommissioned to reduce the road density of the Forest. Although neither appears to have been used for some time, barriers may be installed at the road entrances. Encroaching vegetation has already rendered both roads impassible, so no action beyond administratively removing them from the system road inventory would be required. The 1.6 mile section of FDR 1120 beginning at Big Flat, AR heading east would not be affected.

Activities to Enhance or Improve Wildlife Habitat

The Forest Plan directs resource managers to provide optimal, sustained yields of game animals by perpetuating a mix of early-, mid-, and late-successional forest and woodland conditions. Forest-wide objectives for the improvement and maintenance of habitats utilized by game species known to occur within the proposed project area are found on pages 2-12 and 2-13 of the Forest Plan. To bring wildlife habitat within the proposed project area toward desired conditions outlined in the Forest Plan, the following activities are being proposed.

Five existing ponds within the proposed project area would need maintenance through the years to ensure their ability to hold adequate levels of water is retained. Pond maintenance activities would include removing brush and trees from the dam and banks of the pond with hand tools or a dozer, cleaning out accumulated leaves and debris with a dozer or front-end loader, and adding bentonite (clay) to the pond if the soils become permeable and the water level begins to drop. The bentonite would be spread by hand, but mechanized equipment such as a tiller or tracked equipment would be used to mix the bentonite into the soil.

Six ponds would be constructed to bring the proposed project area to Forest Plan standard for the number of available water sources per acre of dry upland. The new ponds would be constructed to a size of approximately 40 feet in diameter; suitable sites were located during field visits to the area. Pond construction activities would consist of removing trees and other vegetation from the site with a dozer, constructing a dam and spillway with suitable soil, and reshaping the area to hold water. Bentonite may be added if needed to prevent leaking, and the pond banks would be seeded with wildlife seed mixtures. Throughout the years, the new ponds would require follow-up maintenance as described in the preceding paragraph.

Maintenance activities would be conducted on an as-needed basis for all wildlife openings in the proposed project area. These activities may include one or all of the following treatments: brush hogging, fertilizing, disking, seeding of approved wildlife forage and grasses, treatment of woody encroachment by removing small shrubs and trees with hand tools or a bulldozer or burning, and planting of native shrubs and trees such as American plum, persimmon, etc. for soft mast. Invasive species such as black locust may be treated with the lowest effective rate of a commercial formulation of glyphosate via hack and squirt, cut surface, or foliar spray using a back pack sprayer. Repeat herbicide treatments may be required for 2-3 years if trees persist following the initial treatment.

Two established wildlife openings within the proposed project area that have regrown in small trees would be reconstructed to restore their value for wildlife and thereafter maintained as needed. They are located in Compartment 57 (stand 47, 2.2 acres) and Compartment 101 (stand 36, 1.6 acres). To reconstruct the openings, the trees would be grubbed out of the soil using the blade of a bull dozer. Following grubbing, the soil surface in the opening would be smoothed with a dozer blade or tractor and disk and reseeded with grasses or green crop species beneficial to wildlife. If saplings (especially black locust) resprout in the opening, treatment with glyphosate as described above may be required.

The opening in Compartment 101 stand 39 will be allowed to continue to return to a forested condition and will be removed from the wildlife opening maintenance system.

Construction of five wildlife openings between one and five acres each is being proposed to bring the area into compliance with Forest Plan standard FW 34. In Compartment 56 one opening would be constructed from portions of stands 16 and 17 (1.1 acres) and one opening would be constructed from a portion of stand 19 (1.7 acres). In Compartment 101 one opening each would be constructed from a portion of stands 5 (5 acres), 15 (2.6 acres), and 20 (2.2 acres). New stand numbers for these openings would be assigned following construction and adjustments to the acreage of the stands from which they were constructed would be made in the Forest GIS database. Wildlife opening construction consists of removing all the trees (including the root balls) from the area with hand tools such as chainsaws and heavy equipment such as a bull dozer; the ground would be pushed smooth. Warm season grass species, food crops such as clover or rye, or soft mast sources like plum, persimmon, or cherry would be planted. After the openings are established, regular maintenance would be conducted as necessary to keep them in an open condition and to retain their value for wildlife.

To reduce disturbance to wildlife, eleven gates would be placed to block vehicle traffic at nine roads leading to established wildlife openings. These gates would not restrict visitor's walk-in access to these areas. These gates are located at 91056A, 91056C (two gates), 91056F, 91057B, 91057J, 91057N, 91101A, 91101C, and 91101F. In addition, one gate would be placed across the access between a road and a wildlife opening along Roasting Ear Road. This access is not a system road, and the gate would not prevent the vehicular use of Roasting Ear Road.

Management activities to enhance and maintain the Dry Oak Forest community found on approximately 127 acres in Compartment 101 stands 10 and 34 are being proposed. Thinning and prescribed fire would be used to maintain the oak-dominated and open conditions typical for

this forest community type. Fire return intervals would average 2 to 7 years, with occasional burns (approximately every third burn) being conducted during the growing season. If natural establishment of grasses and other plants does not occur, native seed may be broadcast following the burns. When the grassy understory is established, it would be capable of carrying frequent fire as is typical for this community type. In addition to carrying fire, the understory would develop a diversity of plant species, which in turn can support a wide-range of insects. These conditions would benefit game species such as bobwhite quail, wild turkey and deer.

Incidental Tree Removal and Issuance of Forest Product Removal Permits

Trees that must be removed for safety purposes or incidental green trees that are removed to facilitate management activities (including the passage of machinery or other vehicles) may be included in timber sale volumes when practical or sold as fuel wood through the forest products removal permit system.

Dead or down material in closed timber sale units and dead or down material within 100 feet of roads may be sold as fuel wood through forest products removal permits.

Since only the stumps will be treated with herbicide in stands receiving control of understory vegetation treatments, stems felled during this TSI activity may be sold as fuel wood through forest products removal permits, but no sooner than 30 days following the herbicide application.

Request for Comments

I am requesting your comments related to this Proposed Action. Any suggestions that you have for additional actions that would meet the purpose and need for management within the proposed project area are also welcomed. Your comments may identify issues that should be addressed, help us refine the Proposed Action or develop alternative actions; they may also assist us in preparing subsequent analysis documents for this project.

Please submit your comments on the proposed action within 30 days from the date of this letter. Written comments may be mailed to me, delivered in person, sent by facsimile (FAX) or by electronic mail. Comments may also be submitted by telephone. Please mail comments to: District Ranger Cynthia D. Snow, Sylamore Ranger District, Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, ATTN: *The Ramsey Knob Project*, 1001 E Main, Mountain View, AR 72560. Our telephone and FAX numbers are: *phone* (870) 269-3228, *FAX* (870)-269-3000. Hand-delivered comments may be submitted at the Sylamore Ranger District Office within weekday business hours of 7:30 am to 4:00 pm, except on federal holidays. To submit a comment by electronic mail, please use a common digital format (without attachments), and send it to the following e-mail address: comments-southern-ozark-stfrancis-sylamore@fs.fed.us.

An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists will analyze the Proposed Action and any alternatives discovered as part of the scoping or study process and summarize the disclosure of effects within an Environmental Assessment (EA). A pre-decisional version of the EA will be issued first. It along with a letter identifying a preferred alternative and seeking comment will be mailed to all who respond to this solicitation unless a preference not to receive it is expressed;

the pre-decisional EA and letter will also be posted on the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests webpage at <http://www.fs.fed.us/oonf/ozark/projects/planning/sylamoreproject.html> and will be available upon request. Initiation of the formal 30-day comment period for this project will be established through publication of a legal notice in the newspaper of record, *The Stone County Leader*, Mountain View, AR. Comments received during the formal 30-day comment period will be considered prior to finalization of the EA and to my final decision. Only those persons, non-Federal organizations or entities that comment or otherwise express interest during the 30-day comment period will be eligible to appeal my decision on this project.

Please note that comments received at any time during this process, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection.

Thank you for your interest in the management of the Sylamore Ranger District. If you have questions regarding this proposed action please contact me or Sarah Melville of my staff at the address and phone number above.

Sincerely,

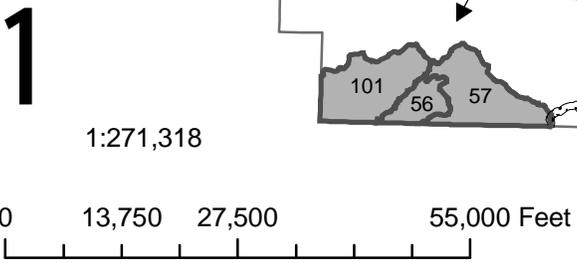
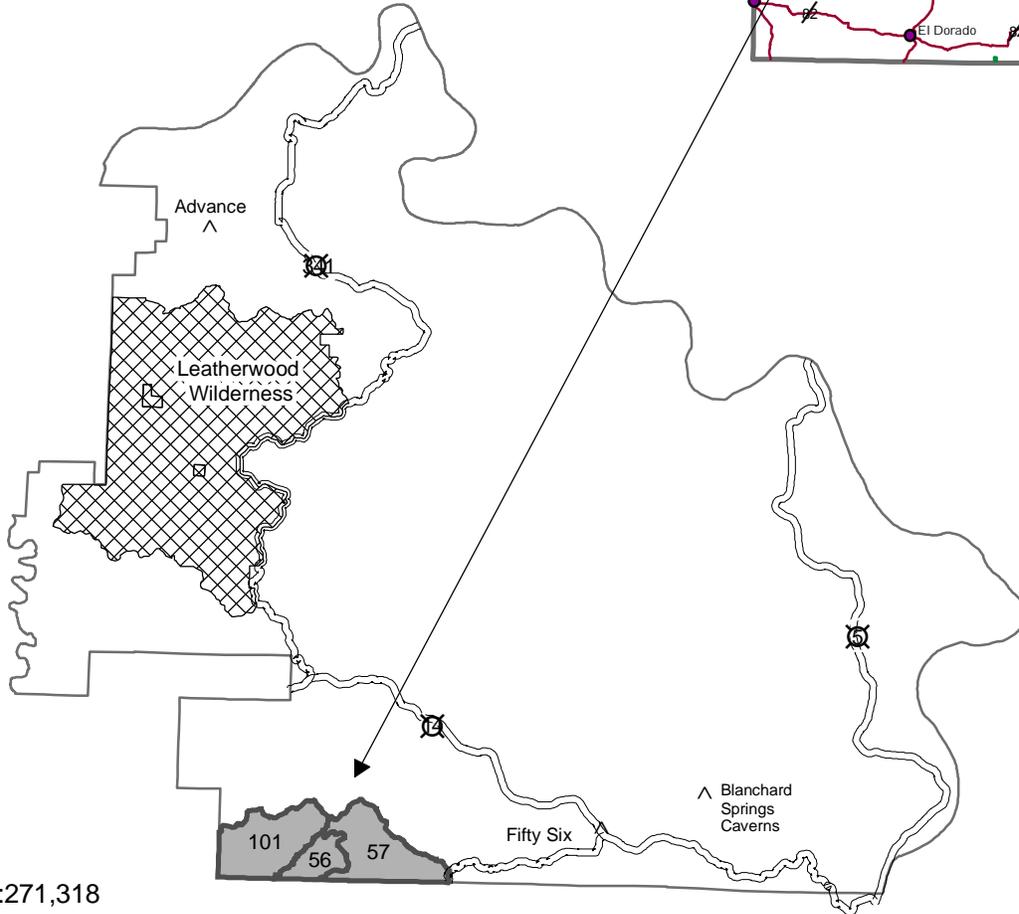
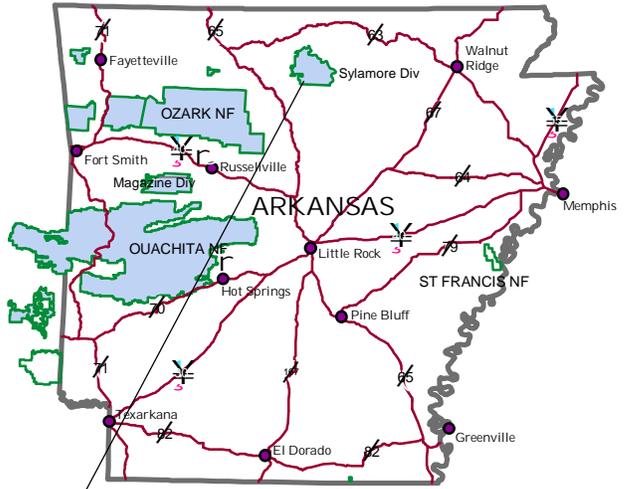
/s/ *Cynthia D. Snow*

CYNTHIA D. SNOW
District Ranger

The Ramsey Knob Project Vicinity Map Ozark - St. Francis National Forests Sylamore Ranger District



Ramsey Knob Project Area
Compartments 56, 57, 101
Sections: 2-4, 9-12 - R13W/T15N
7, 8 - R12W/T15N



The Forest Service uses the most current and complete data available. GIS data and product accuracy may vary. They may be: developed from sources of differing accuracy, accurate only at certain scales, based on modeling or interpretation, incomplete while being created or revised, etc. Using GIS products for purposes other than those for which they were created, may yield inaccurate or misleading results. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace GIS products without notification. For more information contact: Ozark - St. Francis NFs, 605 W. Main St, Russellville, AR 72801 (479)-964-7211.