

DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

For

Suppression of Southern Pine Beetle Infestations
On
The Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests

USDA Forest Service
Southern Region
Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests

Haywood, Madison, Avery, Burke, Caldwell, McDowell, Buncombe, Mitchell,
Transylvania, and Yancey counties on the Pisgah National Forest

Graham, Swain, Jackson, Macon, Cherokee, and Clay counties on the Nantahala National
Forest

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This Decision Notice (DN) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) documents my decision to utilize cut and remove, cut and leave, and pile and burn techniques to suppress the current infestation of Southern Pine Beetles (SPB) on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests.

Our analysis shows that of the 1.2 million acres of national forest land in western North Carolina, approximately 139,000 acres of pine or pine/hardwood stands are susceptible to damage from the SPB. USDA Forest Health specialists in the control of southern pine beetle have estimated that, if left unchecked, the current SPB infestation could cause tree mortality in up to 30,000 acres of these susceptible stands.

The scope of these suppression actions is limited. Suppression methods would not be used if spots have become inactive (beetles are gone from the spot), if a spot has less than 10 active trees and no freshly attacked trees, or if there are few or no host trees available for continued spot growth. When suppression is undertaken, trees from which all SPB have emerged (called vacated trees) will not be cut, except for safety reasons. Leaving those dead trees reduces the expense of Cut and Leave and Pile and Burn, and usually they are not wanted by a timber purchaser doing Cut and Remove. Cutting vacated trees will not contribute to beetle control. Leaving them can allow natural enemies of SPB to complete their development and emergence. Also, standing dead trees provide den sites for certain woodpecker species.

2.0 DECISION

Based on the analysis contained in the environmental assessment, I have decided to select Alternative B to suppress SPB infestations in management areas: 1 through 5, 8 (experimental forests), 11 (Cradle of Forestry in America), 12 (developed recreation Areas), and 13 (special interest areas).

Our analysis shows that it is economically and environmentally impractical to treat every spot outbreak of southern pine beetle on the forest. Therefore, we have established the following four objectives to prioritize where suppression activities may occur:

1. Provide for health and safety of forest visitors and workers.
2. Reduce risk of infestation to adjacent private lands.
3. Minimize mortality in pine communities and protect visual quality.
4. Reduce risk of increased fuel loading from mortality resulting from SPB.

This Decision Notice (DN) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) documents my decision to authorize up to 2,500 acres total of SPB suppression treatments over the next three to five years to suppress the current infestation of Southern Pine Beetles (SPB) on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. Within this total, we estimate that approximately 1,500 acres would be treated with cut and remove, approximately 500 acres with cut and leave, and approximately 500 acres of pile and burn. The actual acres to be treated may well be less depending on the duration and extent of the current SPB outbreak, and practical economic and environmental constraints on which SPB can actually be treated with one of the three techniques of cut and remove, cut and leave, or pile and burn.

2.1 Limitations on Actions

These activities will be focused on reducing or stopping the spread of the southern pine beetle by treating pine trees that are currently infested with SPB along with a small buffer of green pine trees surrounding the SPB spots. Cut and remove treatments will only be allowed in areas which are both within ¼ mile from existing roads and less than 40% slope. No new system roads will be constructed; there will be no new perennial stream crossings, no cable logging, and cut and leave is the only treatment allowed within 100 feet of perennial streams.

In addition, a series of implementation checks will be required prior to treatment of each area to assure adequate protection for archeological sites, scenery, and aquatic, botanical and wildlife resources. Also, detailed monitoring will be required to ensure compliance with all of the mitigation measures that are included in this decision notice.

The possible location of these actions are listed and mapped as an Appendix to the EA.

2.2 Mitigation Measures

We will reduce impacts by implementing the following mitigation measures.

2.2.1 Heritage Resources (Archeological Sites)

All SPB spots scheduled for treatment with the cut and remove suppression method will be reviewed by the zone archeologist or forest archeologist prior to any action on the ground. The review will be documented on the SPB Suppression Implementation Check Form.

SPB spots proposed for cut and remove will be compared to the Heritage Resource atlas to determine if the area has had prior survey, has known sites, and if so, the NRHP eligibility of the respective sites. Areas previously surveyed with no sites or Class III sites require no further review and the activity may be allowed.

Areas with known Class I or Class II sites will be protected from ground disturbing activities, such as skidding and road construction and marked on the ground prior to suppression activity.

Areas not previously surveyed will be subject to a GIS probability analysis to determine need for a field check. All areas with 0 – 10% slope and areas with 11-20% slope within 150 feet of water require an archeological field check prior to any ground disturbance. All newly located/recorded Class I or II sites will be avoided. All areas greater than 10% slope and not within 150 feet of water are considered low probability and require no archeological field check prior to suppression. The Zone archeologist or Forest archeologist will compare GIS ratings with the Heritage Resource atlas to determine the need for field checks. This will be done to ensure special kinds of sites, traditional cultural properties, and/or sacred sites are not adversely affected by the proposed activity. Site-specific consultation with Federally recognized tribes may be required prior to any activity.

All SPB areas field checked during the fiscal year will be reported in a forest report (Pisgah and Nantahala separate) to be submitted to the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) no later than March 1 of the following year.

2.2.2 Scenery

Use the database for stands with susceptible host type to determine the visual quality objective (VQO) for each stand that has reasonable access and potential for SPB infestation. This database will be used to inform managers of the VQO for each area and the necessary mitigation.

2.2.2.1 For all VQO's (MA 1b, 3b, 2a, 2c, 4a, 4c, 4d, 5, 14)

- Establish irregular shaped openings to avoid straight lines or geometric forms.
- Leave unsusceptible trees and shrubs where practical.
- When cutting buffer, feather edges of openings 30-50 feet into uninfested trees.
- Slope cut-banks on roads and landings (where applicable).
- Seed skid roads, temporary roads, landings, and cut/fill banks (where applicable).

2.2.2.2 For (R) Retention VQO (MA 2a, 2c, 4a, 4c, 5, 14)

- No new bladed skid/temporary roads or landings; skid to system road, or use existing skid/temporary roads and landings only.
- Slash treatment when stands are cut and removed.
 - Burn or lop and scatter slash to within 2 feet of the ground for 150 feet beyond the edge of an open road or trail.
 - No slash treatment required in middle ground; burn if needed.
- Log debris treatment when stands are cut and left.
 - Lop and scatter to within 2 feet of the ground for 150 feet beyond the edge of an open road or trail; do not pile and burn.
 - To extent possible, lop and scatter in middle ground; do not pile and burn.

2.2.2.3 For (PR) Partial Retention VQO (MA 2a, 2c, 4a, 4c, 4d; and 1b, 3b seen from AT or BRP)

- Contact landscape architect for assistance in road/landing location in foreground areas where a new bladed skid road, temporary road, or landing is needed.
- Screen or blend-in skid/temporary roads and landings where visible within 200 feet of open roads, trails, etc.
- Slash treatment when stands are cut and removed.
 - Burn or lop and scatter slash to within 2 feet of the ground for 100 feet beyond the edge of an open road or trail.
 - No slash treatment necessary in middle ground; burn if needed.

- Log debris treatment when stands are cut and left. To extent possible, lop and scatter in foreground; do not pile and burn.
 - No treatment required in middle ground; pile and burn if needed for beetle suppression.

2.2.2.4 For (M) Modification VQO (MA 1b, 3b, 4d)

- When adjacent to open roads, trails, etc., screen or blend-in skid/temporary roads and log landings where practical.
- Slash treatment when stands are cut and removed.
 - Burn or lop and scatter slash to within 4 feet of the ground for 50 feet beyond the edge of an open road or trail.
 - No slash treatment necessary in middle ground; burn if needed.
- Log debris treatment when stands are cut and left.
 - To extent possible, lop and scatter in foreground; pile and burn if needed for beetle suppression.
 - No treatment required in middle ground; pile and burn if needed for SPB suppression.

2.2.3 Aquatics, Botanical, and Wildlife Resources

The following mitigating measures will reduce impacts to biological resources. Suppression activities will not occur where forest concern, forest sensitive, and federally listed and candidate species occur. Known element occurrences are identified through current inventories. Implementation checks prior to suppression treatments will assure that potential impacts are substantially reduced for forest concern, forest sensitive, federally listed, and candidate species. Based on these field checks, it may be necessary to avoid the site, or change the location of operations to minimize effects to TES species.

2.2.3.1 All Treatments

Implementation checks for rare aquatic species presence in streams within or adjacent to stands with both of the following characteristics be conducted by the fisheries biologist:

- Elevations equal to or greater than 1,800 feet. This elevation is considered to be the lower limit of naturally-sustainable trout populations across the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests based on habitat/fish population data analysis and Ecosystem classification modeling (Hill and Bryan 2000, unpublished).
- Riparian stands containing only pine species with little or no understory vegetation providing shade to the stream.

Cut and Leave treatment within 100 feet of perennial streams require field implementation checks by botanical, fisheries, and wildlife staff prior to treatment.

2.2.3.2 Cut and Leave and Cut and Remove Treatments

- With the exception of *Tsuga caroliniana*, all known element occurrence of T&E, and S Species areas are excluded from activity. To make sure that current information is available, the Forest Botanist should be consulted on each proposed activity area. To mitigate potential effects to *Tsuga caroliniana*, this species should not be cut. Where *Tsuga caroliniana* occurs near trees to be cut and directionally fell trees away from *Tsuga caroliniana* whenever possible.
- All areas above 4,000 feet (3,600 feet Grandfather RD) require a botanical field check.
- All Special Interest Areas recognized by the current Forest plan and proposed by North Carolina Natural Heritage Program are excluded from the proposal. (N/P Amendment 5, Land Management Plan, III-190)
- Directionally fell trees away from rock outcrops and boulder complexes.

2.2.3.3 Cut and Remove areas (including access roads)

- Must have a completed biological implementation check. This implementation check will include: Date(s) checked, area(s) checked, Natural Communities or habitats encountered, and detected presence or absence of Threatened and Endangered, and Sensitive species. Disclosure includes the presence or likely presence (based upon habitat) of Threatened, Endangered and sensitive species
- As proposed, areas that are found to contain a T&E, and S (other than *Tsuga carolinensis*) or likely habitat as determined by the biologists excluded from activity.

2.2.3.4 Pile and Burn Treatment

- No burning should occur within 100 feet of perennial streams to avoid potential effects of riparian soil heating, increased water temperature, and increased sediment transport on aquatic resources.

2.2.4 Safety

Alert visitors at recreation areas and trailheads if logging activities are occurring.

3.0 The Monitoring Plan

3.1 System that ensures implementation checks

To ensure proper implementation and reporting of actions taken under the authority of this decision, the following items will be done.

3.1.1 SPB ID team for each Forest will be established by the Forest Supervisor, and a project manager for each district will be established by the District Ranger.

The function of the ID team is to ensure all of the proper implementation checks are performed for each action taken under the authority of this decision. The Project Manager is responsible for implementing the requirements in the decision. The Forest Silviculturist will be responsible for annual reporting.

3.1.2 A procedure for implementation is established with this decision and followed by each Project Manager. Training on the following procedure will be given prior to any action taken under the authority of this decision.

3.1.2.1. Check for disclosure of environmental effects.

If a suppression action is proposed, the stand number must be checked against a list of susceptible stands covered in the EA (see Susceptible Stands List - Appendix A of the EA) to ensure the stand is covered in the EA.

3.1.2.2. SPB Tracking Form and SPBIS Data Sheet (See Attachment A). When a SPB spot is located, a SPBIS Data Sheet will be initiated and updated. For each suppression action proposed, information from the Susceptible Stands List, Appendix A of the EA, must be transferred to a SPB Tracking Form. The proposed treatment will be described by the Project Manager. Treatment options, prescription (desired treatment), timeframes for desired implementation, and SPBIS #, acres of treatment, elevation, road plan, and water information will be included. The Project Manager will attach the appropriate scenery mitigation based on the VQO.

3.1.2.3. Submit forms to resource specialists.

A copy of the SPB Tracking Form, SPBIS Data Sheet, and topo map will be attached to an Implementation Check Form and submitted to each member of the SPB ID Team (Wildlife Biologist, Fisheries Biologist, Botanist, and Archaeologist). Each specialist must complete the Implementation Check Form, and return it to the Project Manager.

3.1.2.4.Reporting.

All required forms must be filed in the district files under designation 3400. SPB Tracking Forms will be requested in December by the Forest Silviculturist every year for the duration of this decision (approximately 5 years). They will be consolidated into one report consisting of acres treated by county and compared to information in SPBIS. Reports will be available upon request from the Supervisor's Office.

3.2 Disclosure of Actions taken under this authority

3.2.1. Accountability Requirements in the analysis.

3.2.1.1.The Forest Silviculturist will compile the following reports:

- Maintain records of cut and remove acres within Cherokee, Graham, Clay, Macon, and Swain counties (effects on Indiana bat). When the total acreage for these counties approaches 25 acres, advise the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service.
- Annual report in March to the State Historic Preservation Officer.
- Annual report in January to the Forest Supervisor to ensure that acre limits for suppression are not being exceeded.
- Coordinate updating of the SPBIS database to show actual treatments that were implemented.

4.0 Reasons for this Decision

I believe the benefits of taking action to suppress SPB attacks outweigh the risks for the following reasons.

4.1 Meets the Purpose and Need for Action

The action alternative meets the purpose and need for the project by allowing prompt action for suppression of Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) attacks.

First, we will take actions to safeguard visitors and workers. Dead or dying trees can fall on visitors in campgrounds, along trails, while driving through the forest, or even visiting administrative sites to get information. We will remove these hazards promptly to reduce the risk of injury to people.

Next, we will respond to this epidemic on national forests to reduce possible infestations on adjacent private lands. With over 1 million acres, the national forests are likely to have the highest density of SPB in western North Carolina. We need to take prompt action so the values of our neighbor's lands are not diminished.

We seek to keep scenic views intact by stopping the proliferation of SPB spots in sensitive viewing areas. I have received many comments from visitors who are alarmed by the sight of many dead trees. People expect to see a healthy forest. Suppression activities may not ease people's concerns, but it should reduce the number of SPB attacks and keep more trees alive over the long term.

Dead pine trees burn hot and fast, raising the risks of wildfires. We will attempt to stop the pre-mature death of pines by suppressing the attack of southern pine beetle. According to experts of southern pine beetle, about 30,000 acres of trees on the national forests could be killed during this infestation (EA, p 13). We will do our best to keep the infestation well below that amount.

4.2 Responds to Issues

4.2.1 Ability to do Site Specific Analysis.

During the scoping process, several commentors doubted our ability to do site specific effects analysis across the entire landscape of the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. For several reasons, I believe the information before me represents an adequate disclosure of environmental effects.

First, the limitations on actions greatly narrowed the scope of this proposal (DN, Section 2). Suppression activities are limited to susceptible forest types within one-quarter mile of roads on slopes less than 40 percent. Further, no treatments would be applied in wilderness areas or proposed natural areas. These limitations narrowed the scope of the proposal from nearly 1200 thousand acres to almost 114 thousand acres (EA p. 5); about 13 percent of the forest.

Susceptible stands are mapped and evaluated (EA, Appendix A). Databases are available in spatial (GIS) and database management (MS Access) formats. Relationships of susceptible stands to sensitive environmental components were derived through spatial analyses.

Results of the analyses prompted the formulation of mitigating measures (Section 2; and EA p 52) . While susceptible host forest types tend to be less sensitive (i.e. pine plantations with previous disturbances) than other areas of the forest, mitigating measures further reduce adverse impacts to other resources.

We tested the database to see if current SPB spots would be treated under this decision. In Graham County, 5 spots were chosen. Only part of 1 spot was not covered by the database because it was 3 years old. The database of susceptible stands does not cover stands less than 15 years of age, therefore, the decision does not cover these young stands.

To monitor analysis assumptions, natural resource specialists will conduct implementation checks to make sure the actions would fall within the environmental consequences disclosed in the EA.

4.2.2 Scenic Impact from the Appalachian Trail

The members and staff of the Appalachian Trail Conference have key interests in the views from the Appalachian Trail. This is a national scenic trail that traverses 2,150 miles from Georgia to Maine. A key attraction, it draws many thousands of visitors throughout the year.

We will take special precautions on 2 travel corridors; the Appalachian Trail and the Blue Ridge Parkway. All susceptible stands within one-half mile of the either feature are identified in the database. When cut and remove methods are required for these identified stands, the removal techniques must “partially retain” scenic characteristics of the stand. Identified stands, with SPB spots scheduled for cut and removal, will be checked by a landscape architect, who will specify layout design patterns to meet scenery objectives.

About 1200 susceptible stands of the nearly 2900 fall within one-half mile of the Appalachian Trail or Blue Ridge Parkway. Madison and Graham counties have a combined count of over 500 susceptible stands that fall within ½ mile of the Appalachian Trail (Table 4.2.2). We will take special precautions in these areas to assure a partial retention scenery objective.

Table 4.2.2. Total Number and Acres of Susceptible Stands; Number and Acres of Susceptible Stands within 1/2 mile of the Appalachian Trail or Blue Ridge Parkway, by County.

COUNTY	Total Susceptible Stands	Acres	Stands Within 1/2 mile	Acres Within 1/2 mile	Percent Of Total Acres
AVERY	34	1106	34	1106	100.00%
BUNCOMBE	19	799	19	799	100.00%
BURKE	298	13383	69	2666	19.92%
CALDWELL	207	8240	34	1164	14.13%
CHEROKEE	477	25440			
CLAY	97	4035	20	969	24.01%
GRAHAM	486	16792	269	8691	51.76%
HAYWOOD	70	2042	57	1339	65.57%
HENDERSON	10	298	8	242	81.21%
JACKSON	75	2484	8	160	6.44%
MACON	287	10630	83	1763	16.59%
MADISON	249	6774	249	6774	100.00%
MCDOWELL	257	10503	184	8233	78.39%
MITCHELL	35	1814	35	1814	100.00%
SWAIN	144	3984	69	1959	49.17%
TRANSYLVANIA	115	4097	37	955	23.31%
YANCEY	30	1236	30	1236	100.00%

The high percentage of susceptible stands with 1/2 mile of the Blue Ridge Parkway occurs in the following counties: Avery, Buncombe, McDowell, Mitchell, and Yancey. If cut and removal techniques are specified in these stands, implementation checks will assure scenery objectives are met.

4.2.3 Opposition to Road Construction during Cut and Remove Operations

Road construction activities on national forests have been a controversial issue over the past few years. In January, 2001, two new rules were published in the Federal Register affecting roads construction in some manner: The Roadless Area Conservation Rule and the Roads Policy. (The result of implementing these rules is expected to be a contraction of [or at least no further expansion of] the current transportation system on national forests).

Most people support the treatment of SPB attacks, but they want careful consideration of access to the treatment areas. For this reason, no new system

roads will be constructed to treatment areas. Therefore, no expansion of the forest transportation system will occur.

There are possibilities that skid trails or temporary haul route construction could occur. These activities are short-term uses, which are decommissioned immediately after their intended use. These features do not expand the transportation system.

Table 4.2.3. Total Acres by Access Category; Acres by Slope
And Access Categories.

ACCESS Category	Total Susceptible Acres	Probabilities Of Access Categories	Under 40% Slope Across the Stand (Acres)	Probability Of Slope Under 40% by Access Category	Over 40% Slope Across Part Of the Stand (Acres)
Adjacent to Road	62476	0.5496841	36531	0.73380471	25945
Not Accessible	11857	0.1043217	1680	0.03374646	10177
Skid Trails needed	39325	0.3459941	11572	0.23244883	27753

As with any decision, there are risks associated with uncertainty. In this case, there is uncertainty about how often a skid trail or temporary haul route might be needed. The information in Table 4.2.3 helps to analyze this uncertainty. More than half of the time, SPB spots are likely to occur immediately adjacent to a road, and no skid trails would be necessary.

Since only ground skidding is allowed, treatments are limited to stands (or portions of stands) less than 40 percent slope. As shown in Table 4.2.3, over 73 percent of the time, stands less than 40% are adjacent to roads. Less than one-quarter of the time is it likely that skid trails or temporary haul routes are necessary. I acknowledge the effects from skid trail or temporary haul route construction is not risk free, but the probability of risk is low enough such that the benefits of suppressing the spread of SPB outweigh the potential effects. Further, implementation checks will make sure mitigating measures are employed.

4.2.4 Protection of Private Lands.

Many people are concerned about this epidemic. News articles gave me a sense of public awareness about SPB effects. Attached are several of the more than 25 articles that appeared in local newspapers over the past year.

Even local subdivisions owners are taking action to curtail SPB attacks. In one article, local homeowners are encouraged with the following recommendations: “You must immediately make a cursory examination of all pine trees on your property to determine if Southern pine beetle is present...It is important that we obtain 100 percent compliance from all property owners within Biltmore Forest in the next 30 to 60 days in order to curtail a potential Southern pine beetle population explosion in the spring of 2001” (Asheville Citizens Times, Nov 27, 2000).

It is important to me that reasonable actions are taken to protect the natural resources of our neighbors. We will diligently check counties with a high percentage of susceptible acres adjacent to private lands; such as: Jackson, Macon, Yancey, Swain, and Madison counties (Table 4.2.4).

Table 4.2.4. Total Susceptible Stand Acres, Amount and Percent of Susceptible Stands adjacent to Private Land

COUNTY	Total Susceptible Acres	Susceptible Acres Adjacent To Private Land	Percent Of Total Acres
AVERY	1106	156	14.10%
BUNCOMBE	799	221	27.66%
BURKE	13383	790	5.90%
CALDWELL	8240	2687	32.61%
CHEROKEE	25440	3672	14.43%
CLAY	4035	423	10.48%
GRAHAM	16792	3580	21.32%
HAYWOOD	2042	446	21.84%
HENDERSON	298	0	0
JACKSON	2484	1902	76.57%
MACON	10630	7539	70.92%
MADISON	6774	3547	52.36%
MCDOWELL	10503	2735	26.04%
MITCHELL	1814	421	23.21%
SWAIN	3985	1712	42.96%
TRANSYLVANIA	4097	475	11.59%
YANCEY	1236	785	63.51%

Adjacent landowners in all counties can count on us to check on SPB attacks and determine if suppression activities are applicable and allowable under this decision.

4.2.5 Protection of Wildlife Openings

Concerns were raised by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission to protect wildlife openings from damage. Sometimes, it is necessary to use a road that has been sown with grasses. This removes the grassy habitats for species, such as wild turkey, that need nesting and forage areas.

These are my concerns as well. About 2,900 miles of roads on the forest provide some level of grass/forb habitat. The use of these roads will occur as this decision is implemented. However, the impact is expected to last only one season. SPB spots in the mountains have been smaller (2 to 10 acres) rather than the large spots of coastal plain forests. With smaller spots, cut and remove treatments should be manageable within one season. Then, the roadbeds will be seeded and restored to habitat equivalent to pre-project conditions. Finally, the benefits of suppressing the SPB and enhancing the chances of keeping intact pine communities over the long term outweigh the short term loss of grass habitat, which will be restored within one season.

4.2.6 Protecting Significant Archeological Sites.

High probabilities of significant archeological sites occur along waterways. Most of the sites along waterways occur within 100 feet of the water (Personal Communication, Snedeker, 2001).

Table 4.2.5 shows the number of susceptible stands by stream order. Stream orders 0 have no streams and 1 are considered narrow intermittent streams. Stream order 2 are sometimes intermittent and sometimes small perennial streams. Perennial streams exist for all stream orders at 3 or above.

Humans from earlier ages generally occupied sites along larger streams and rivers, which are stream order 3 and above (Personal Communication, Snedeker, 2001). These areas are usually less steep and accommodate human occupation. As shown in the table below, as streams become larger, more of the area occurs on gentle slopes. Thus, it is likely that archeological sites would most likely occur on stream orders 3 and above.

Table 4.2.5.. Total Number of Susceptible Stands by Stream Order; Number of Susceptible Stands under 40 Percent Slope, Percent of Under 40 % compared With Total Number of Stands

STREAM Order	Number of Susceptible Stands	Probability Of Stream Order Occurrence	Number of Susceptible Stands Under 40% Slope	Percent of Susceptible Stands Under 40% slope
0	1083	0.37	354	33%
1	804	0.28	319	40%
2	505	0.17	261	52%
3	308	0.11	167	54%
4	128	0.04	58	45%
5	52	0.018	31	60%
6	8	0.003	1	13%
7	4	0.001		

In susceptible stands, the likelihood of encountering stream order 3 and above is less than 20 percent. Therefore, it is unlikely that disturbance of archeological sites would occur, even without mitigation measures. Regardless, no cut and remove or pile and burn treatments are allowed within the 100 foot buffer on either side of perennial streams that protect sites near water. Implementation checks will assure compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act.

4.2.7 Increased Fire and Smoke Management Risks

As described in the EA (Fire Section), risks of wildfire are moderate to high, whether we take action or not. Dead trees from the infestations become highly volatile fuels. This could have most unfavorable consequences when high wildfire danger exists near private land, especially close to homes and improvements.

As shown in Table 4.2.4, high proportions of susceptible stands are near private land. We will take special precautions to monitor these stands and take appropriate action as soon as possible.

5.0 Public Involvement

The scoping process began on December 13, 1999 when a letter containing the project proposal was mailed from the Forest Supervisor's Office to each address on the forest mailing list. In addition, letters were mailed by the individual Nantahala and Pisgah ranger districts to their mailing lists. A legal notice was published in the Asheville Citizen-Times on December 16, 1999. Sixteen letters were received in response to the scoping request. The scoping letters, the mailing list, and the project proposal are filed in the administrative record.

The notice and comment period for the project began on August 9, 2000 and ended on September 9, 2000. A request for comments was published in the Asheville Citizen-Times on August 8, 2000. Four letters were received. All four letters supported the choice of the preferred alternative. Two letters expressed concern over the potential visual impacts from suppression efforts adjacent to the Appalachian Trail. The potential visual impacts will be mitigated by using the measures outlined in section 2.2.2 of this decision notice. The Response to Comments is located in Appendix C of the environmental assessment.

6.0 Finding of No Significant Impact

After reviewing the EA, the Biological Evaluation, and the reasons for the decision (above), I have determined this decision will not cause significant effects on the human environment and an environmental impact statement is not needed to disclose further environmental effects. Criteria used in this deliberation include the 1) context and 2) the intensity as described in 40 CFR 1508.27.

6.1 Context:

The actions of this decision are limited in context. While the range of actions may proceed across the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests, treatment areas are narrowly defined as follows.

First, actions are limited to forest types that support yellow or white pines, the host trees of SPB. This is less than 13 percent of the forests.

Next, treatments are limited to areas that are within one-quarter mile of roads, on slopes less than 40 percent. Actions are restricted in special areas, such as wilderness or proposed natural areas.

Finally, suppression actions are limited to 2,500 acres. An approximate breakdown by treatment methods would be 1,500 acres (cut and remove), 500 acres (cut and leave), and 500 acres (pile and burn), plus monitoring of treated sites. A tracking system, as described above, has been established to make sure these limits are not exceeded. Before

actions are taken, implementation checks will be conducted to determine if the effects of actions are covered by the EA, BE and reasons for this decision. Therefore, the limited context of the actions in this decision would not cause significant effects to the environment.

6.2 Intensity:

6.2.1. Both beneficial and adverse impacts are considered. Attempting to stop the spread of SPB would keep more trees alive, reduce wildfire risks, and protect adjacent private landowners investments.

Potential adverse impacts include risks to scenery, sensitive species, disturbance of archeological sites—but these resources will be protected using implementation checks and the tracking system.

Given the possibility that 30,000 acres could be affected, and this decision allows 2,500 acres of active treatment, the net affect of our actions would not be significant. But the benefits outweigh possible risks, because we will target areas that might affect private lands or pose high safety risks.

6.2.2. As stated in the purpose and need (EA, p. 4) and the reasons cited above, safety of visitors and our workforce is one of the objectives for this project. The actions we take will reduce risks to public safety.

6.2.3. The limitations on actions and the mitigation measures cited in the EA (pp. 53) stipulate no historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas will be impacted. Riparian areas will be protected by not allowing cut and remove or pile and burn treatments. The implementation checks and monitoring system identified in Section 3 (above) will assure compliance.

6.2.4. Many people are concerned about the SPB epidemic, its effect on the environment, and the likelihood of success of suppression efforts. However, the effects of suppression efforts on the quality of the human environment are not highly controversial. The scope of the decision is narrow due to the limitations and mitigating measures, which address concerns expressed by interested publics.

6.2.5. Risks of effects on the human environment due to suppression efforts are outlined in the EA (pp. 17-52) and the reasons for this decision (DN, section 4). The risk of taking action is relatively insignificant compared with risks of taking no suppression efforts to contain this epidemic.

6.2.6. The limitations, mitigating measures and implementation checks assure that this action does not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places and will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

6.2.7. The suppression efforts, when taken in context with other past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions, pose no apparent significant adverse cumulative effects (EA, pp. 17-52).

6.2.8. This action does not set a precedent for future actions with significant effects and does not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The physical and biological effects are limited to the area of planned activity.

6.2.9. The degree to which this action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat have been considered. No direct, indirect or cumulative effects are anticipated to any threatened or endangered species. Implementation checks will assure that potential impacts on sensitive species from our actions are minor and would not cause a trend toward federal listing.

6.2.10. This action does not threaten a violation of Federal, State or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. North Carolina Best Management Practices will be met through application of LRMP standards.

I have determined that this decision is not a major federal action, individually or cumulatively, and will not affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I have considered both context and intensity in my determination that is based on the analyses documented in the environmental assessment and reasons cited above.

7.0 Findings Of Consistency with other Laws

7.1 The suppression actions are consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests and the National Forest Management Act. The following paragraphs discuss my reasoning for the finding:

7.1.1 The actions of this project are consistent with the Forest Plan management objectives given in Chapter III (71-76) and in the general forest direction.

7.1.2 The actions of this project are consistent with the Forest Plan because mitigation measures for impacts will be fully applied in the planned actions and implementation checks will be conducted prior to any actions. The project is feasible and reasonable, and will result in applying management practices that meet the Forest Plan overall direction of protecting the environment.

7.1.3 The actions of this project will meet all requirements of the Endangered Species Act and all agreements with the State Natural Heritage Program, in that the impacts to Proposed, Endangered, Threatened, or Sensitive (TES) species or critical habitat for these species are insignificant and will not affect the population viability of any TES species.

7.1.4 The suppression actions meet the following criteria.

7.1.4.1. The type of suppression actions are best suited to the multiple use goals established for the area; potential environmental, biological, cultural resource, aesthetic, engineering and economic impacts have been considered.

7.1.4.2. Regeneration checks conducted over the years show that lands of susceptible host types can be restocked within 5 years. Another environmental analysis, with public participation, will be necessary for the follow-up regeneration methods.

7.1.4.3. Actions were not chosen primarily because they will give the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber.

7.1.4.4. Actions were chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.

7.1.4.5. No permanent impairment of site productivity is expected from actions.

7.1.4.6. Actions will provide effects, consistent with desired conditions, on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired tree species, recreation use, and other resource yields.

7.1.4.7. Actions are feasible and practical in terms of transportation requirements, labor, supply and contract administration costs.

7.1.4.8. Even-aged Management is appropriate for use because the suppression of SPB infestations will provide for safety of Forest visitors and workers, reduce the risk of infestations on adjacent private land, reduce impacts to scenery, minimize loss of timber resources, and reduce the risk of damage from wildfires by minimizing increased fuel loading. With the exception of chemical control, cutting trees is the only practical and feasible way of disrupting SPB populations.

8.0 Appeal Rights and Implementation of Decision

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7. A written Notice of Appeal must be postmarked or received within 45 days after the date notice of this decision is published in the Asheville Citizen-Times, Asheville, North Carolina. The Notice of Appeal should be sent to USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 1720 Peachtree Road, N. W., Suite 811N, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.

Appeals must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. For additional information on the appeals process or this decision, contact Lawrence Hayden, at USDA Forest Service, P. O. Box 2750, Asheville, North Carolina 28802, (828) 257-4864.

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

/s/ John F. Ramey
JOHN F. RAMEY
Forest Supervisor

4/13/2001
DATE