

DECISION MEMO

Southern Pine Beetle Prevention

Thinning

Lower Chattooga River Hydrologic Unit in Fiscal Years 2005-2006

USDA Forest Service – Chattahoochee–Oconee National Forests - Tallulah Ranger District - Rabun County, Georgia

1. DECISION; PURPOSE AND NEED FOR PROJECT

I have decided to approve the proposal to thin three stands using non-commercial methods. The three stands are located in the lower Chattooga River hydrologic unit, and include a total of approximately 74 acres. More specifically, the stands are in the Wolf Creek – Camp Creek vicinity, and are called Areas T1, T3 and T7 on the attached map and in the scoping letter. One of the thinnings (T3) will likely be thinned in the next month and the other two within the next two years.

Existing conditions within these three forest communities include 12-13 year old shortleaf pine trees at densities ranging from approximately 590 to 750 trees per acre, or a spacing of approximately 8 feet apart. Work under this decision will reduce the density to approximately 150-200 trees per acre (approximate spacing of 16 feet) of shortleaf pine and other native hardwoods within these forest communities.

This project is designed to help meet Objectives 3.1, 8.1, and 40.1 in the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (Forest Plan) as follows:

Forest Plan Goal	Objective to Meet Goal	Project Description
Goal 3 (page 2-6): Enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types.	Objective 3.1: Restore shortleaf pine forests on sites where they once occurred.	Shortleaf pine will be released when present and able to respond to release.
Goal 8 (page 2-7): Contribute to restoration of native tree species whose role in forest ecosystems: (a) has been reduced by past land use; or (b) is threatened by insects and disease, fire exclusion, forest succession, or other factors.	Objective 8.1: Maintain shortleaf pine forests by thinning trees.	Same as above.
Goal 40 (page 2-39): Reduce vulnerability to native pests [southern pine beetle] through appropriate management.	Objective 40.1: Reduce stem density of overstocked shortleaf pine stands.	Thin as described above and recommended in Appendix F of the Forest Plan, page F-57.

Thinning in these stands will provide more growing space for the remaining trees, thereby reducing the stress of competition for sunlight, water and nutrients. This reduction in stress will substantially reduce the risk of future infestations by the southern pine beetle. Thinning will also increase the growth of native hardwoods in the overstory and understory, as well as allowing understory and herbaceous species to flourish within the gaps created by these thinnings.

The T1 and T3 thinning areas are within Management Prescription (Prescription) 8.A.1, *Mix of Successional Forest Habitats*, and the T7 area is in Prescription 9.H, *Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Plant Associations to their Ecological Potential*. The thinnings, as specified above, are appropriate within these Prescriptions (Forest Plan, pages 3-130 and 3-167) and meet the emphases for each prescription zone.

Small portions of the project areas will be within riparian corridors, Prescription 11. Thinning within these corridors will emphasize species diversity, and native hardwoods will be released where present (Forest Plan, page 3-172), while meeting tree density levels and other applicable standards of the Best Management Practices (BMP's) for Georgia (*Georgia's Best Management Practices*, pages 10-11).

I have determined that this action falls under Category 6 of the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Section 31.2, which includes a category of actions which do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment (Gatins and SABP concern, 5/11/04). Specifically, this category includes timber stand improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides and do not require more than one mile of road construction. There is no road construction included in this decision.

I have also determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the project to have significant effects. Therefore, neither an environmental impact statement nor an environmental assessment will need to be prepared (Gatins concern, 5/11/04). Specifically:

- ❑ This project will not take place on steep slopes or highly erosive soils. The "Soil Survey of Rabun and Towns Counties, Georgia" (available for review at the Tallulah District office) shows that soils in these areas have a moderate erosion hazard and slight to moderate equipment limitations based on the slope and soil series present (project file.) Moderate erosion hazard means that "some attention must be given to controlling erosion." Thinning as planned will have little effect on erosion, sedimentation, and soil compaction (SABP concern, 5/11/04).
- ❑ The action will not affect any federally Endangered or Threatened species, nor impact any Forest Sensitive species (SABP concern, 5/11/04). It will not result in a trend toward federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, or a loss of viability on the Forest. Zone Wildlife Biologist Andy Gaston has reviewed Forest Service files and no PETS (Proposed, Endangered, Threatened, or Sensitive) species were identified that may be impacted by the thinnings. No known locations of PETS species were identified in Forest Service files or in the Georgia Natural Heritage Program database for the project locations (see project file.)
- ❑ No jurisdictional wetlands (as defined in the Forest Service Manual 2527.05--8), floodplains, or municipal watersheds will be affected by this project.
- ❑ No congressionally designated area, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or National Recreation Areas will be affected by this project. The project is not within a research natural area.
- ❑ The thinnings are not within a currently inventoried roadless area (SABP concern, 5/11/04).

- ❑ No known historic properties eligible for or listed in the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by this project (project file).
- ❑ These as well as other proposed thinning projects are not connected to one another in any environmentally binding way. In other words, one thinning does not trigger or depend on one another. Therefore, these thinning projects are considered similar (same methods, some have same timing and geography) but not connected in any way (Gatins concern, 5/11/04). In addition, these actions are considered to not have significant effects, individually or cumulatively (see above).
- ❑ None of these three stands display any characteristics meeting the criteria for old growth as described in “*Guidance for Conserving and Restoring Old Growth Forest Communities on National Forests in the Southern Region*,” (available for review at the Tallulah Ranger District office) and by following guidance laid out in the Forest Plan (pages 2-16 to 2-18)(SABP concern, 5/11/04).
- ❑ These thinning actions will not change (open, close, construct, reconstruct, or obliterate) any road conditions within or nearby the areas to be treated, therefore no road analysis is necessary (SABP concern, 5/11/04).

2. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Scoping both internally and externally raised no concerns that were determined to be extraordinary circumstances.

A letter detailing this project was sent out to 102 individuals, agencies and public organizations in April of 2004 (see project file, Tallulah Ranger District.) Several responses were received. Some comments were supportive (Myers, 4/22/2004; Chattooga Conservancy, 5/10/2004) while two others raised concerns (Gatins, Georgia Forest Watch, 5/11/2004; Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project (SABP), 5/11/2004). My staff have answered these questions within this document and referenced the letter where the question can be found.

In addition, we answered questions in the field with Joe Gatins on May 11, 2004.

3. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

This project is consistent with the Forest Plan, as amended. The actions in this project fully comply with the Forest-wide standards (Forest Plan, 2-3 through 2-72) as well as Prescription 8.A.1, 9.H and 11 standards (Forest Plan, pages 3-130 to 3-133 and 3-167 to 3-182).

This project will comply with the Recreational Fisheries Executive Order by enhancing riparian corridors and producing little (if any) additional sediment within the lower Chattooga River drainage.

As discussed above, state-approved BMP's will be met and this project will comply with the Clean Water Act.

This project complies with the requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b):

- Thinning is appropriate in these forest communities to meet the multiple-use goals established in the Forest Plan. (see pages 1-2 for discussion)
- Actions have not been chosen to maximize dollar return or produce the greatest output of timber, although these factors were taken into consideration. (see pages 1-3)
- Actions have been chosen after considering the potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands. (see pages 1-3)
- The actions will enhance and improve the productivity of the sites and ensure conservation of soil and water resources. (pages 1-4)
- The projects provide the desired effects on all affected resource yields, including water quality.
- The actions are practical in terms of thinning requirements and costs.

4. IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision will be implemented in Fiscal Year 2005 and 2006.

5. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.8(a)(4.)

6. CONTACT PERSON

For further information concerning this decision or the appeal process contact Steve Cole by phone, letter, e-mail, or in person. The address of the Tallulah Ranger District office is 809 Highway 441 South, Clayton, GA 30525, and the phone number is (706) 782-3320. Contact Steve by e-mail at sncole@fs.fed.us. This document is viewable on the Chattahoochee – Oconee National Forest web site, www.fs.fed.us/conf/.

7. SIGNATURE AND DATE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

David W. Jensen

January 3, 2005

DAVID W. JENSEN

DATE

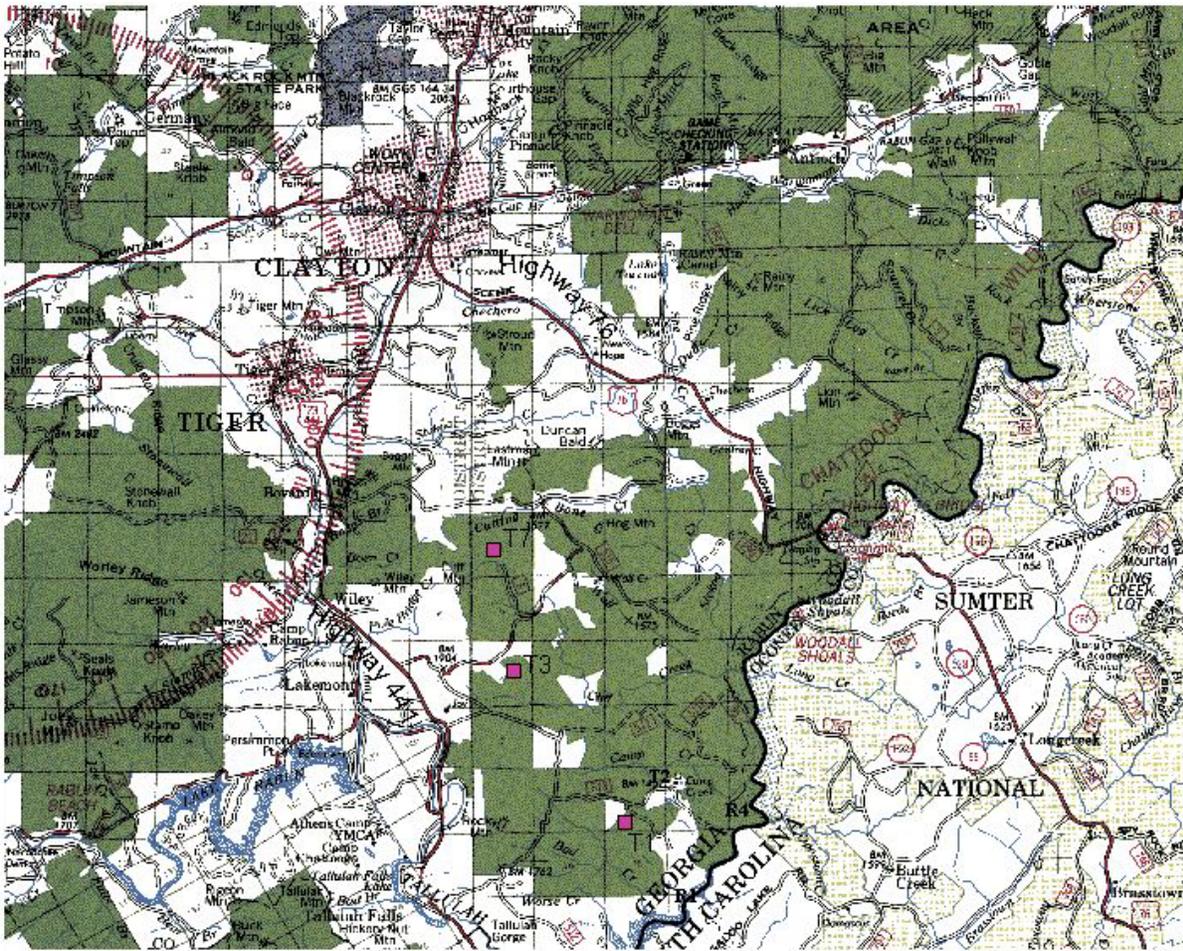
District Ranger

Vicinity Map

Southern Pine Beetle Prevention

Areas T1, T3, & T7

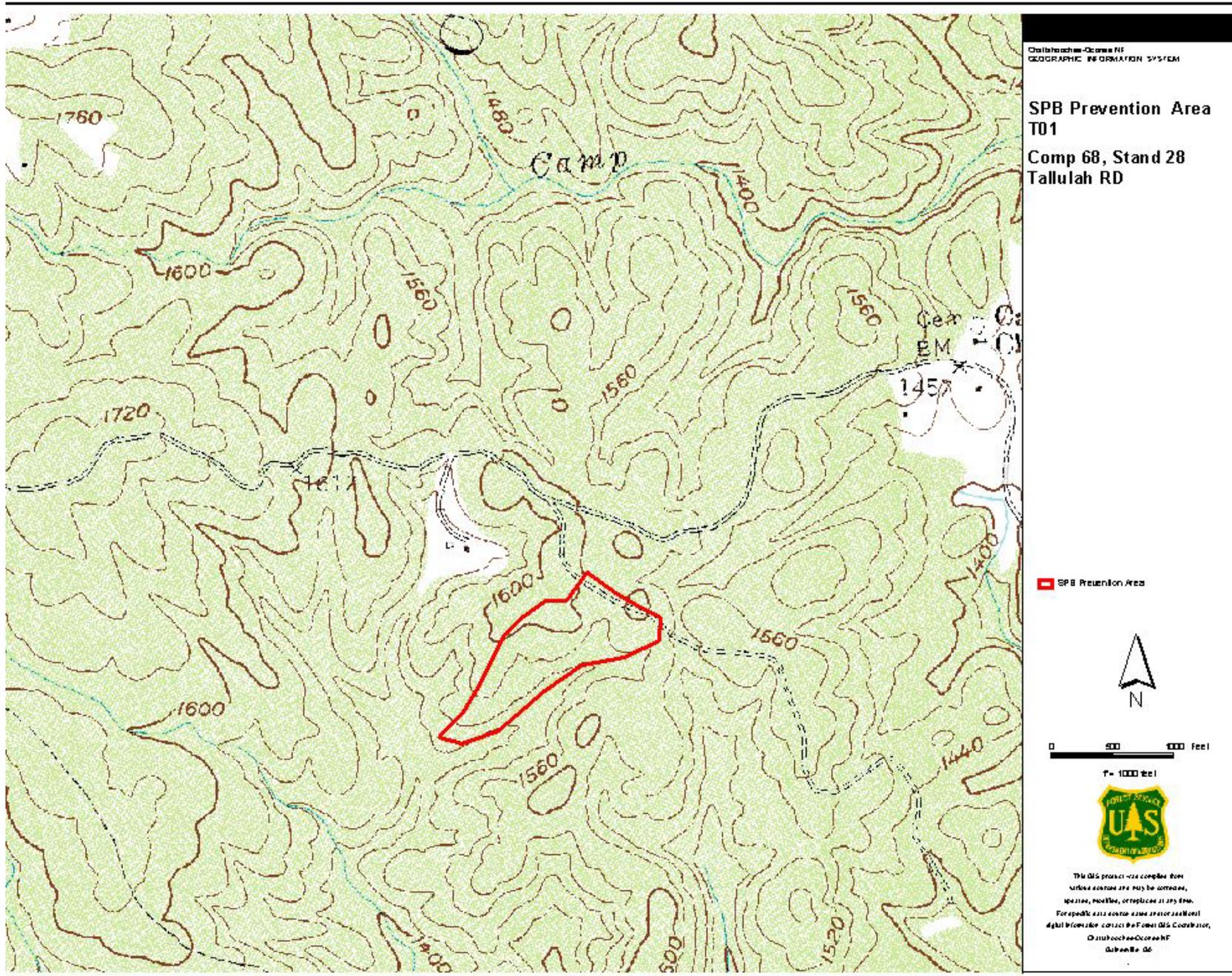
Chattahoochee - Oconee National Forests - Tallulah Ranger District - Rabun County



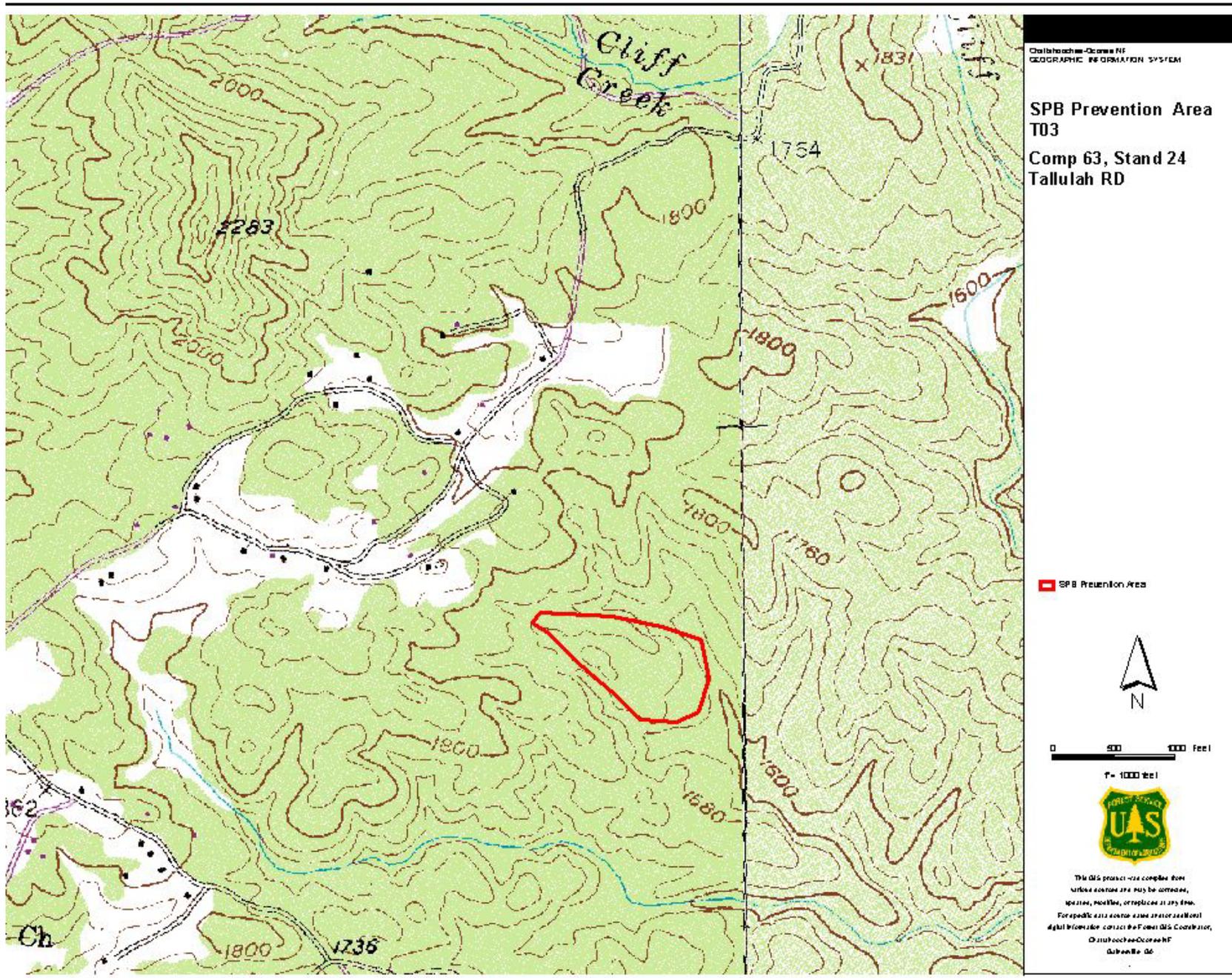
■ Thinning (T) Projects



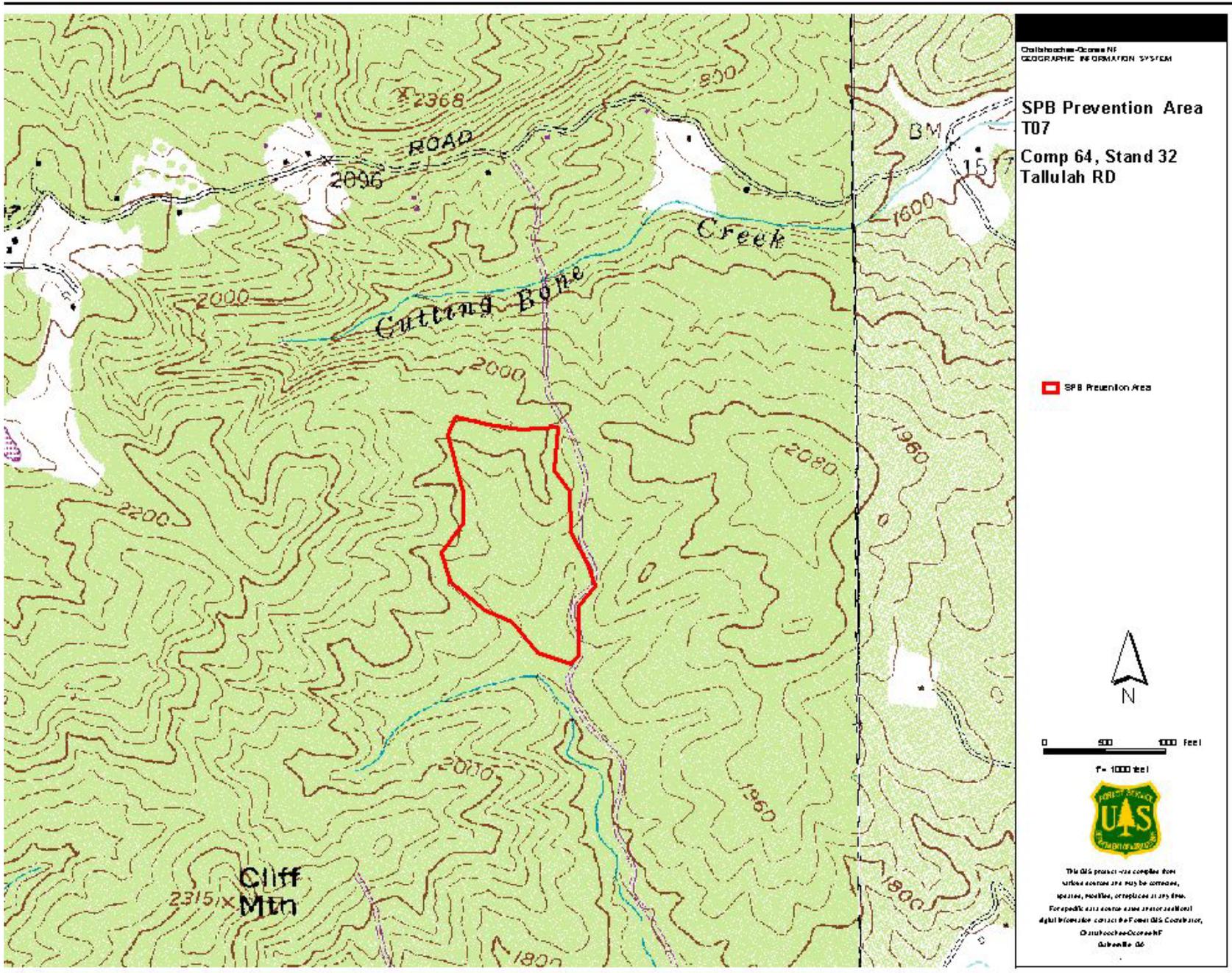
10/14/04 - SNC



Attachment – Map – SPB Prevention Thinning - 1



Attachment – Map – SPB Prevention Thinning - 2



Attachment – Map – SPB Prevention Thinning - 3