

Decision Memo

Southern Pine Beetle Prevention Project

USDA Forest Service Southern Region

Chattahoochee National Forest

Toccoa Ranger District

Fannin and Gilmer Counties, Georgia

DECISION, and Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

I have decided to carry out the following activity to help prevent outbreaks and spread of Southern Pine Beetle (SPB). Approximately 36 acres of loblolly pine plantations are designated for commercial thinning. Thinning these stands will improve the health and vigor of the remaining trees which will help control the outbreak and spread of SPB. This area is located in Stand 2 of Compartment 693 in the Weaver Creek area. Existing skid trails and log decks will be used. This stand will be thinned to approximately 50 basal area. This stand is located in Management Prescription 12.A. Thinning for Forest Health is permitted in this prescription.

This decision will implement Goals in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest Land and Resource management Plan (Forest Plan) to reduce stem density on an annual average of 1,500 acres of overstocked loblolly pine stands on the Chattahoochee during the first ten years of Plan implementation (Objective 40.1).

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

This action does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and therefore, are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environmental assessment (EA). The specific category, identified in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 “Environmental Policy and Procedures” is Section 31.2 Category 12: Harvest of live trees not to exceed 70 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction.

FINDING OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES:

The District interdisciplinary team screened these actions for the presence of any one of the extraordinary circumstances identified in Interim Directive No. 1909.15-2002-2 to Forest Service Handbook 1909.15. Section 30.3 paragraph 2 lists the following resource conditions that were considered:

- Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species;
- Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds;

- Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas;
- Inventoried roadless areas*;
- Research natural areas;
- American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites;
- Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.

* We found that no extraordinary circumstances exist that might cause the action to have significant effects. This area is in an inventoried roadless area (Rocky Mt.). The following Scenic Integrity Objectives will be used to establish a more natural appearing landscape:

D. Slash will be lopped to within an average of 2 feet of ground, when visible within 100 feet on either side of county road #157.

F. Stems are cut to within 6 inches of the ground in the immediate foreground.

G. Unit marking is applied so as to not be visible within 100 feet of county road # 157.

H. Work will be scheduled outside of major recreation seasons.

I. Special road and landing design is used. Log landings, roads and bladed skid trails will be located out of view if possible to avoid bare mineral soil observation from county road #157.

T. The visual impact of roads will be blended so that they remain subordinate to the existing landscape character in size, form, line, color, and texture.

W. Cut and fill slopes will be revegetated to the extent possible.

Y. Provide a range of stem diameters but favor 14 inch and larger stems in a mixture with other smaller sized tree stems.

AA. Impacts to forest trails will be minimized. Trail-related mitigations can include all or portions of the following: Temporary road and/or skid trail crossings across designated forest trails should be kept to a minimum. Any crossings should be perpendicular to designated forest trails. If trails are used as skid trails/haul roads, specify trail cleanup/rehabilitation at the end of the contract. Trail width will not be increased except where it follows the county road. Retain character trees and trees that define the trail corridor. Minimize changes to trail alignment and surfacing; do not straighten the trail or change its surface unless alternate material will enhance trail and protect resource. Warning signs will be placed on all trail access points and along the trail where activities are occurring.

SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public scoping began in March 2005. The purpose of scoping was to determine the issues and concerns related to the proposal. Five scoping responses were received on this project. The

comments received were used to refine the project and analysis. They were also used to explore the possibility of extraordinary circumstances and potential effects to those resources. Scoping both internally and externally raised the following concerns:

1. The Benton Mackaye Trail Association was concerned about an area of approximately 3 acres in size where the trail goes through this stand on the east side. I have decided not to include this area in the thinning project. They also asked that they be notified before logging commences in this area.
2. Georgia Forest Watch was concerned about hardwoods being cut in this area. There will be no hardwoods marked for cutting.

There were no other concerns that were determined to be extraordinary circumstances.

The Appalachian Trail Club and Edwin Dale were both in concurrence with this activity.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

Forest Plan Consistency – The actions in this decision are consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee National Forests (Forest Plan) and all Amendments to the Forest Plan.

Endangered Species – Implementing the actions in this decision will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or result in loss of any other species' viability, or create significant trends towards Federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act.

Cultural Resources – The actions in this decision will not adversely affect any sites listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic resources.

State approved Best Management Practices (BMP's) will be met and this project will comply with the clean water act.

This project complies with the seven requirements of the National Forest Management Act related to vegetation manipulation at 36 CFR 219.27 (b).

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision will be implemented beginning in December 2005.

NOTICE, COMMENT AND APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 (e) (1). Notice of the proposed action was published. An opportunity to comment on the DM was provided. Comments received were only supportive of the actions proposed.

CONTACT PERSON

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SIGNATURE AND DATE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

 /s/ *Tina R. Tilley*
 for

Alan Polk
District Ranger
Brasstown Ranger District

DATE: December 5, 2005