



File Code: 1900

Date: May 27, 2009

## Request for Comments

### Restoration and Maintenance of Mountain Longleaf Pine Stands

Dear Interested Citizen,

The Conasauga Ranger District of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests is seeking comments on a proposal to maintain relict mountain longleaf stands on Taylor's Ridge in Chattooga County, Georgia by thinning, prescribed burning, and other treatments. Implementation of this project is expected to occur during fall 2009.

Your comments and suggestions may be used to modify the specific methods described in the proposed project. Please be as specific as possible when responding. Comments received, including names, become part of the project record and are available for public review. Comments must be received no later than **Friday, June 26, 2009**.

I intend to categorically exclude this proposal from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment because it falls under the intent of Category 6, "Timber stand...improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction," as identified in 36 CFR 220.6(e). This proposal would also fall under Category 5, "Regeneration of an area to native tree species, including site preparation that does not involve the use of herbicides or result in vegetation type conversion," as identified in 36 CFR 220.6(e). Under these categories, the decision would be documented in a Decision Memo, and the decision would be subject to appeal under 36 CFR 215.

### Background

Longleaf pine forests originally covered almost 100 million acres in the southeastern United States. Now, less than 3 million acres remain, and longleaf pine forest in its natural fire-maintained condition is recognized as the rarest community type in the southeast (Noss et al. 1995). Mountain longleaf, a geographically separate ecotype, is even rarer, comprising only 2% of longleaf pine's total remnant acreage. It exists only on isolated forested ridges in northeast Alabama and northwest Georgia, which are underlain with Red Mountain sandstone, such as the Taylor's Ridge area (Wharton 1978). These are xeric sites, meaning that they are dry with poorer growing conditions.

Relict mountain longleaf pine stands on the Conasauga Ranger District are rare. The mountain longleaf in this proposal is found in combination with other yellow pine, xeric oak (blackjack oak, post oak), and other hardwood species on two parallel finger ridges on Taylor's Ridge (please see attached map).



## Purpose and Need

The stands containing the relict mountain longleaf pine have undergone fundamental changes over the past 60-70 years from the almost complete exclusion of fire. This exclusion has caused a shift in species composition from fire-adapted longleaf pine and xeric oaks to less fire-tolerant Virginia pine and hardwoods. A small amount of mature longleaf pine, estimated at 200 trees in these stands, still exists. Native grasses and forbs typically associated with mountain longleaf pine communities are largely absent. No longleaf regeneration is present because the deep layer of pine needles on the ground and the shade cast by the hardwood midstory does not allow for the longleaf seedlings to become established.

Mountain longleaf pine communities are fire-dependent ecosystems. Regular low-intensity fires keep pine needles and other natural build-up on the Forest floor from becoming very deep. With the absence of fire, the needle layer surrounding the relict pine stands is much deeper than what would be expected in a healthy mountain longleaf community. Should a wildfire occur within the stands, there is a risk that the relict longleaf pine would not survive the higher intensity fire that may occur in the duff layer surrounding the trees.

The purpose and need of this project is to maintain the existing relict mountain longleaf and encourage the restoration of a mountain longleaf community to these sites so that this rare community is not lost from Taylor's Ridge.

## Proposed Action

The Conasauga Ranger District is proposing the following activities in the relict mountain longleaf pine stands on Taylor's Ridge (Compartment 933, stands 41 and 43):

- **Timber Stand Improvement.** This includes partial cutting in the overstory to improve species composition and stand structure. Timber harvest would emphasize the removal of Virginia pine and other fire intolerant hardwoods while favoring the relict longleaf pine and xeric oak species. A varying canopy would result, creating a mosaic of gaps and thinned areas. An average residual basal area of 50 – 60 ft<sup>2</sup> per acre would be retained. This would be a commercial harvest.

A non-commercial timber stand improvement treatment would also be conducted in the mid-story of these two stands. Treatment would consist of hand-felling non-commercial stems (trees one to five inches in diameter at breast height) and leaving them on site.

The combined treatments would restore the open conditions necessary for establishment of mountain longleaf pine seedlings in the understory of these stands.

- **Removal of the deep duff layer around longleaf trees.** This would be accomplished by raking duff, leaf litter, pine cones, and other debris away from the base of the mature longleaf pines. This treatment would reduce the likelihood that fire will kill the old longleaf trees due to the unnatural buildup of duff around the trunk.

- **Prescribed burning.** The reintroduction of dormant season fire on a regular basis (every 3-5 years) would control hardwood sprouting and Virginia pine establishment while favoring native grasses and forbs and longleaf seedlings. An approximately 180 acre existing burning block will be used. Firebreaks are in place.
- **Planting of mountain longleaf seedlings and native grasses, if necessary.** To successfully restore this valuable ecological community, it may be necessary to plant seedlings and native grasses. Gaps in the canopy would be the focus of planting efforts. This would be completed if monitoring of the site indicates that the removal of Virginia pine, midstory control, and prescribed fire, intended to encourage longleaf pine natural regeneration and establishment of native grasses, is not as successful as intended.

### Forest Plan Direction

This project is consistent with the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest’s Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) Objective 3.5, “Restore 1,100 acres of mountain longleaf pine and longleaf pine-oak forests...on sites where they likely occurred” (Forest Plan p. 2-6).

The stands to be treated fall within Management Prescription 9.H (Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Plant Associations to their Ecological Potential). The focus for this Prescription is on: 1) communities in decline, 2) communities converted from historic composition, 3) communities on ecologically appropriate sites but unable to maintain themselves, and 4) communities infrequent on National Forest but not regionally rare (Forest Plan p. 3-167).

### HOW TO PROVIDE COMMENTS

You may send your comments and suggestions as follows:

<b>Comment Format</b>	<b>Contact Information</b>
Hard Copy Letter	Conasauga Ranger District 3941 Highway 76 Chatsworth, Georgia 30705 ATTN: Longleaf Pine Project
Email	<a href="mailto:rbstokes@fs.fed.us">rbstokes@fs.fed.us</a> Subject: Longleaf Pine Project
FAX	706-695-1872
Phone	Ruth Stokes, 706-695-6736 x105 Danny Skojac, 706-695-6736 x104

The electronic version of the information provided in this letter is available on the Forest's website at: [www.fs.fed.us/conf/](http://www.fs.fed.us/conf/).

Thank you for your interest in the management of the Conasauga Ranger District.

Sincerely,

*/s/ Michele H. Jones*  
MICHELE H. JONES  
District Ranger

Enclosure: Project Map