

Decision Notice
& Finding of No Significant Impact
Commercial Thinning
In
Young Pine Stands
For
RCW Habitat Improvement, Forest Health & SPB Prevention
USDA Forest Service
Oconee Ranger District, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest
Putnam, Jasper and Jones Counties, Georgia



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Decision and Rationale for the Decision

Decision

Based upon my review of the alternatives, I have decided to select **Alternative B** (Proposed Action) of the *Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands* (EA) on the Oconee Ranger District, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. The Selected Alternative will:

1. Thin approximately 8339 acres in 208 timber stands that are in an overstocked condition (see Appendix A for a complete list of stands).
2. Use and maintain the existing road system, including temporary roads.

Background

As stated in Section 1.3 of the EA, the objectives of the proposal are, through harvesting and related activities, to:

- Improve the existing condition of timber stands to improve forest health and habitat for threatened and endangered (T&E) plants and animals, particularly the red cockaded woodpecker (RCW).
- Reduce the risk of mortality to pine trees by the Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) in key RCW foraging habitat.
- Reduce fuel accumulations in key RCW foraging habitat within the project area.

I believe the Selected Alternative accomplishes these objectives.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the Selected Alternative, I considered one other alternative in detail. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in Section 2.3 of the EA.

Alternative A – No Action

Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. I did not select this alternative for several reasons. This alternative would not have created critical habitat for RCW and the area would continue to be below Forest Plan standards for this type of habitat. This alternative would have the potential to adversely affect RCW habitat needs. Stands would continue to remain overstocked and their condition would not be improved. This alternative would not have reduced fuel accumulations in the area; nor would it have reduced the risk of these stands to damage from the Southern Pine Beetle.

Other Alternatives Not Considered

Section 2.2 of the EA disclosed two alternatives I considered but eliminated from detailed study. Since they were not considered in detail in the EA, they were not considered in the range of alternatives for my decision. One alternative considered stand treatment without commercial harvest; this alternative was dropped because of the fuel loadings it would create that could jeopardize remaining trees. Another alternative was considered that contained additional thinning acres; it was

dropped because there was insufficient current information available as to the potential effects harvesting these stands would have on water quality within the project area.

Public Involvement

On June 25, 2004, a scoping letter explaining the proposal and requesting site-specific information on it was mailed to 69 individuals and organizations that have expressed previous interest in management on the Oconee Ranger District. In addition, the proposal appeared in both print and internet versions of the quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests since January 2004. A legal notice requesting comments was also published in *The Eatonton Messenger* on July 1, 2004. Three written and verbal responses were received during scoping. On July 15, 2004 the Forest Service hosted an open house for the public to comment or receive additional information about the proposed project.

Issues were identified from public comments received during the scoping period and internal management concerns. Analysis responding to key issues is evaluated and disclosed in Chapter 3 - Environmental Effects.

A 30-day review of the pre-decisional Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA was initiated on September 2, 2004. No individuals and organizations responded with substantive comments (36 CFR 215.2) during the comment period.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action (Sections 3.1, 3.2, Chapter 3; and Table F-2, Appendix D, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA).
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety and implementation will be in accordance with mitigation measures (Section 1.7.5 Chapter 1; Section 2.4, Chapter 2; and Section 3.1.2, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA).
3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because there are no park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas in the project area, nor are there local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment (Section 1.7.8, Chapter 1, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project (Section 1.7, Chapter 1 and Sections 3.1.2, 3.2.2, Chapter 3, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA).

5. We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (Sections 1.6 and 1.7, Chapter 1 and Sections 3.1.2, 3.2.2, Chapter 3, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA).
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because the project is site specific and effects are expected to remain localized and short-term (Sections 1.6 and 1.7, Chapter 1 and Sections 3.1.2, 3.2.2, Chapter 3, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA).
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant (Sections 1.7.2, 1.7.3, 1.7.4, 1.7.5, 1.7.6, 1.7.7, and 1.7.8, Chapter 1, and Sections 3.1.2, 3.2.2, Chapter 3, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA).
8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because the two Class I sites and the three Class II sites are either avoided or protected (Section 1.7.2, Chapter 1, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA). The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources, because the three Class II sites are either avoided or protected (Section 1.7.2, Chapter 1, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA). On March 21, 2005, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) concurred with the findings of no adverse effect in the cultural report the Forest Service submitted. In addition SHPO requested that sites 9PM1442 and 9PM1443 be fully protected pending further evaluation of eligibility determination. These two sites will be fully protected through avoidance.
9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or their habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973, because the project entails thinning overstocked pine plantations to provide foraging habitat for RCW, does not entail road construction, and is expected to occur over a seven year time frame (Sections 3.1.2 and 3.2.2, Chapter 3 and Appendix B, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA). On July 22, 2004, the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service concurred that the proposed action will have no effect on any species that is federally listed as endangered or threatened.
10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (Section 1.7.8, Chapter 1, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA). The action is consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (Section 1.1 and 1.3.1, Chapter 1, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA).

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

My decision to implement the Selected Alternative is consistent with the intent of Forest Plan's long-term goals and objectives as stated in section 1.1 and 1.3.1, Chapter 1, Commercial Thinning in Young Pine Stands EA. The project was designed to conform with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines.

Administrative Review and Contacts

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12. No substantive comments expressing concerns were received during the 30 day comment period relating to the proposed action(s) analyzed and documented in the EA (36 CFR 215.12(e)(1)).

For further information on this decision, contact Bill Nightingale, District Ranger, Oconee Ranger District, 1199 Madison Road, Eatonton, Georgia 31024. Phone: 706-485-7110; or Sandra Henning, Project Leader, 1755 Cleveland Highway, Gainesville, GA 30501. Phone 770-297-3064.

Implementation Date

As per 36 CFR 215.9(c)(1), when no substantive comments are received during the 30 day comment period relating to the proposed action(s) analyzed and documented in the EA, implementation of this decision may occur immediately after publication (36 CFR 215.7(b)) of a decision documented in a Decision Notice.

William B. Nightingale

WILLIAM B. NIGHTINGALE
District Ranger
Oconee Ranger District

April 20, 2005
Date

APPENDIX A

Commercial Thinning – List of Stands by Alternative

Compartment	Stand	Forest Type	Age	Acres	Alternative
102	1	Loblolly	31	84	B
102	6	Loblolly	31	26	B
102	14	Loblolly	20	12	B
102	26	Loblolly	20	16	B
102	27	Loblolly	20	44	B
103	11	Loblolly	35	60	B
104	1	Loblolly	28	51	B
104	9	Loblolly	28	29	B
104	22	Loblolly	21	15	B
104	24	Loblolly	28	21	B
104	41	Loblolly	28	8	B
105	4	Loblolly	25	58	B
105	11	Loblolly	25	18	B
106	1	Loblolly	21	43	B
106	2	Loblolly	21	7	B
106	4	Loblolly	21	15	B
106	5	Loblolly	24	26	B
107	7	Loblolly	22	34	B
107	10	Loblolly	22	82	B
107	13	Loblolly	23	48	B
107	15	Loblolly	23	84	B
108	2	Loblolly	33	76	B
108	3	Loblolly	28	23	B
108	5	Loblolly	33	27	B
108	8	Loblolly	22	48	B
108	12	Loblolly	22	38	B
108	17	Loblolly	33	19	B
108	19	Loblolly	37	6	B
108	25	Loblolly	21	55	B
108	27	Loblolly	21	32	B
108	40	Loblolly	33	12	B
108	43	Loblolly	33	20	B
108	44	Loblolly	33	32	B
110	36	Loblolly	21	29	B
111	5	Loblolly	29	22	B
111	6	Loblolly	29	29	B
111	7	Loblolly	29	20	B
111	18	Loblolly	20	10	B

First Time Thinning Projects

Compartment	Stand	Forest Type	Age	Acres	Alternative
111	33	Loblolly	29	17	B
111	34	Loblolly	28	22	B
111	39	Loblolly	21	146	B
112	6	Loblolly	19	35	B
112	8	Loblolly	18	13	B
112	11	Loblolly	44	13	B
112	13	Loblolly	31	36	B
112	27	Loblolly	28	42	B
112	29	Loblolly	18	16	B
112	31	Loblolly	28	19	B
112	59	Loblolly	22	23	B
115	5	Loblolly	24	16	B
115	8	Loblolly	26	63	B
115	14	Loblolly	23	15	B
115	16	Loblolly	25	56	B
115	18	Loblolly	25	171	B
115	20	Loblolly	23	14	B
115	20	Loblolly	23	13	B
115	23	Loblolly	26	29	B
115	26	Loblolly	18	15	B
115	27	Loblolly	25	10	B
115	29	Loblolly	18	12	B
116	4	Loblolly	25	28	B
116	7	Loblolly	25	31	B
116	10	Loblolly	39	36	B
116	15	Loblolly	44	94	B
116	19	Loblolly	64	61	B
116	24	Loblolly	64	88	B
120	2	Loblolly	32	64	B
120	8	Loblolly	32	30	B
120	11	Loblolly	32	20	B
120	13	Loblolly	19	20	B
120	15	Loblolly	22	18	B
120	16	Loblolly	19	69	B
120	33	Loblolly	32	25	B
120	34	Loblolly	32	12	B
123	1	Loblolly	28	44	B
123	13	Loblolly	23	59	B
123	17	Loblolly	27	65	B
123	19	Loblolly	27	20	B
123	20	Loblolly	27	66	B
123	21	Loblolly	22	11	B
123	23	Loblolly	22	17	B
125	14	Loblolly	26	9	B

First Time Thinning Projects

Compartment	Stand	Forest Type	Age	Acres	Alternative
125	15	Loblolly	26	25	B
125	20	Loblolly	26	46	B
125	21	Loblolly	26	18	B
127	8	Loblolly	25	32	B
127	9	Loblolly	25	27	B
127	32	Loblolly	25	15	B
128	2	Loblolly	21	17	B
128	7	Loblolly	21	37	B
128	11	Loblolly	20	75	B
128	23	Loblolly	20	14	B
130	5	Loblolly	19	56	B
130	6	Loblolly	31	18	B
130	7	Loblolly	31	43	B
130	8	Loblolly	19	52	B
130	9	Loblolly	31	22	B
130	12	Loblolly	31	49	B
131	2	Loblolly	40	19	B
131	4	Loblolly	31	119	B
131	13	Loblolly	31	7	B
133	15	Loblolly	28	31	B
133	16	Loblolly	28	57	B
133	20	Loblolly	28	51	B
133	38	Loblolly	54	20	B
134	7	Loblolly- Hardwood	27	26	B
134	9	Loblolly	27	66	B
134	10	Loblolly	27	18	B
134	31	Loblolly	26	189	B
134	32	Loblolly	26	154	B
134	33	Loblolly	26	19	B
136	1	Loblolly	26	37	B
136	4	Loblolly	26	24	B
136	10	Loblolly	26	21	B
136	14	Loblolly	22	7	B
137	1	Loblolly	25	76	B
137	10	Loblolly	22	56	B
137	12	Loblolly	24	77	B
139	6	Loblolly	32	40	B
139	9	Loblolly	32	17	B
139	18	Loblolly	24	13	B
140	18	Loblolly	32	42	B
140	24	Loblolly	32	31	B
140	29	Loblolly	32	22	B
142	1	Loblolly	23	25	B

First Time Thinning Projects

Compartment	Stand	Forest Type	Age	Acres	Alternative
142	7	Loblolly	21	9	B
142	13	Loblolly	22	7	B
142	23	Loblolly	31	87	B
142	43	Loblolly	23	11	B
143	3	Loblolly	29	43	B
143	17	Loblolly- Hardwood	52	92	B
144	3	Loblolly	29	78	B
144	7	Loblolly	29	131	B
144	7	Loblolly	29	161	B
144	8	Loblolly	23	20	B
144	11	Loblolly	29	18	B
144	14	Loblolly	23	56	B
144	23	Loblolly	29	35	B
144	24	Loblolly	29	32	B
144	26	Loblolly	29	14	B
144	30	Loblolly	29	24	B
144	35	Loblolly	29	57	B
144	36	Loblolly	29	44	B
145	31	Loblolly	35	20	B
146	1	Loblolly	24	89	B
146	2	Loblolly	21	68	B
146	4	Loblolly	36	29	B
146	10	Loblolly	24	50	B
146	11	Loblolly	24	7	B
146	14	Loblolly	36	27	B
146	28	Loblolly	23	5	B
146	31	Loblolly	18	10	B
146	32	Loblolly	20	29	B
146	33	Loblolly	36	10	B
146	39	Loblolly	59	9	B
147	7	Loblolly	25	42	B
147	10	Loblolly	25	5	B
147	15	Loblolly	23	20	B
147	18	Loblolly	34	44	B
147	21	Loblolly	23	19	B
147	22	Loblolly	34	11	B
147	28	Loblolly	34	33	B
150	1	Loblolly	29	130	B
150	2	Loblolly	29	44	B
150	6	Loblolly	20	17	B
151	11	Loblolly	32	98	B
151	12	Loblolly	32	64	B
152	3	Loblolly	29	56	B

First Time Thinning Projects

Compartment	Stand	Forest Type	Age	Acres	Alternative
152	10	Loblolly	29	77	B
152	17	Loblolly	18	18	B
152	37	Loblolly	19	7	B
153	10	Loblolly	19	10	B
153	19	Loblolly- Hardwood	23	33	B
153	20	Loblolly	23	18	B
154	1	Loblolly	27	72	B
154	3	Loblolly	23	23	B
154	5	Loblolly- Hardwood	22	8	B
154	7	Loblolly	23	30	B
154	8	Loblolly	23	31	B
154	12	Loblolly	27	51	B
154	13	Loblolly	27	35	B
154	15	Loblolly	23	66	B
154	20	Loblolly	27	24	B
154	36	Loblolly	23	17	B
155	1	Loblolly	25	59	B
155	2	Loblolly	25	58	B
155	3	Loblolly	24	64	B
155	4	Loblolly	24	82	B
155	6	Loblolly	26	24	B
155	7	Loblolly	26	43	B
156	2	Loblolly	26	40	B
156	4	Loblolly	25	90	B
156	7	Loblolly	25	35	B
156	19	Loblolly	20	12	B
156	29	Loblolly	22	138	B
157	10	Loblolly	24	68	B
157	12	Loblolly	24	40	B
157	13	Loblolly	24	27	B
157	15	Loblolly	24	25	B
157	16	Loblolly	24	13	B
157	18	Loblolly	22	33	B
159	4	Loblolly	31	58	B
159	9	Loblolly	31	66	B
159	16	Loblolly	21	11	B
159	26	Loblolly	18	36	B
160	15	Loblolly	21	25	B
160	17	Loblolly	21	72	B
161	2	Loblolly	31	72	B

Figure DN-1: Commercial Thinning Vicinity Map

