

DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
for the
Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Restoration Project

September 2004

USDA Forest Service
Southern Region
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
Oconee Ranger District
Jasper County, Georgia

BACKGROUND

The red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) is endemic to open, mature and old-growth pine ecosystems in the southeastern United States. Due to a nearly complete loss of habitat, and subsequent extreme decline in population size, the RCW was federally listed as endangered in 1970. Currently, less than three percent of the species' former population size exists. The Oconee National Forest (including the Hitchiti Experimental Forest) and the adjacent Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge both contain remnant RCW populations and the potential to support many more clusters, or family groups, of these woodpeckers.

In 1995, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Region 8 Record of Decision (ROD) for the *Management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and its Habitat on National Forests in the Southern Region* Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) directed National Forests to delineate Habitat Management Areas (HMAs) to support the recovery of the RCW. The management direction on the Oconee National Forest designated 52,966 acres of the Forest as a HMA for the RCW.

According to the revised RCW Recovery Plan, the Oconee National Forest and Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge together make up one secondary core population of RCW, referred to as the Piedmont Recovery Unit. The plan defines a secondary core population as "a population identified in recovery criteria that will hold at least 250 potential breeding groups at the time of and after delisting." In 2000, the Piedmont Recovery Unit had 59 breeding pairs—20 on the Oconee National Forest and 39 on the Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge. To bring the RCW population in the Piedmont Unit up to the recovery objective of 250 breeding pairs, the USFS has developed a recovery program in accordance with the objectives and direction provided in the revised RCW Recovery Plan (January 2003). As part of this recovery program, the USFS, in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) plans to translocate (bring in adult birds from another population) RCWs from a population with an excess number of birds to repopulate proposed habitat sites on the Oconee National Forest. In order to successfully translocate RCW breeding pairs, the proposed translocation sites must have suitable RCW foraging and nesting habitat. This habitat can be obtained by vegetation manipulation and other silvicultural methods.

As a result of several lawsuits dating back to the early 1990s, the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest has had to withdraw a number of projects and timber sales on the Forest, which has affected the ability to meet certain natural resource objectives. In addition, several needed resource management activities on the Forest have not been conducted in recent years due to lack of appropriated funds or not being eligible for KV (Knutson-Vandenberg) dollars. With the exception of a few activities to address the southern pine beetle (SPB) and some prescribed burning, there has been no active management to address RCW habitat needs on the Oconee National Forest.

PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), there are legislative requirements to positively manage for endangered species like the RCW on Federal lands. A prime objective of the Oconee National Forest is to follow the ESA by providing habitat for the recovery of the RCW by restoring and managing a pine ecosystem, which furnishes preferred habitat for RCW foraging and nesting.

Existing habitat is not suitable for the RCW within the project area on the Oconee National Forest. A majority of the pine stands within the project area have excessive amounts of pine stems beyond the preferred habitat requirements (see Revised RCW Recovery Plan). Preferred habitat is between 40 and 70 basal area (BA), while current stand information within the project area shows basal areas over 100. Thus, at present, stands do not provide the open park-like stands that the RCW needs for suitable habitat. RCWs require open areas of mature pines 60 years and older for nesting. Foraging habitats vary in age but usually areas that are pine savannas with little, if any, midstory of hardwood.

The management of the RCW is currently listed as Goal 51 and Management Prescriptions 8.D and 8.D.1 in the Chattahoochee-Oconee Forest Plan. Desired conditions for the RCW are stated here. The Oconee National Forest is not currently meeting these desired conditions. Under the ESA and RCW Recovery Plan, the Forest RCW population has been declared a Recovery population and the Forest is mandated by law to bring about this recovery. Habitat management is clearly necessary for the recovery of the species and therefore meeting the purpose and need.

DECISION

Based on my review of the Final EA, including the discussion of the alternatives considered, the issues associated with this proposal, the environmental effects analysis, and my personal knowledge of the area, I have decided to select the actions in Alternative 2 (see attached maps for project activities by compartment). This alternative primarily consists of using vegetation manipulation by thinning and midstory control (via mechanical methods, herbicide use, and prescribed fire) to help restore habitat for the RCW within Compartments 113, 114, 117, 118, and 119. Specific activities that would occur under Alternative 2 are listed and described below.

- Thin approximately 3,969 acres in Compartments 113, 114, 117, 118, 119 to reduce stands to a 50 to 70 square-foot basal area (BA), with a target of 60 BA. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the approximate number of acres proposed for thinning in each compartment.

Table 1. Acres Proposed for Thinning By Compartment under Alternative 2						
Comp.	Stands	Total Comp. Acres*	No. Acres to be Thinned*	No. Acres For Each Stand Type*		
				Mature Pine Sawtimber	Immature Pine Sawtimber	Pine Pole Timber/ Precommercial
113	1-5, 7, 9, 11-13, 15, 16, 21, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30	1,283	986	613	161	212
114	1, 3, 7, 10-12, 17-23, 25-28, 31, 32, 58, 59	1,809	745	441	73	231
117	1, 3-6, 8-10, 12, 14, 15, 17-22, 26-29, 32, 33, 35-38, 63-65	1,505	953	702	65	186
118	1, 2, 4, 6-11, 13, 14, 16-20, 23, 25, 28, 53, 54	1,158	501	306	61	134
119	1-3, 6-9, 11-18, 22, 24-27, 30, 31, 58	1,328	784	321	97	366
TOTAL		7,083	3,969	2,383	457	1,129

*Includes National Forest System lands only.

- Conduct prescribed burning of the entire project area (7,083 acres) over the next several years, including growing season burns within recruitment stands to control midstory vegetation. [Note: These burns are already scheduled, have been covered under a separate decision document, and are beginning to occur in the area. Therefore, prescribed burning within the project area is not part of the Proposed Action, but would work in conjunction with the Proposed Action to improve RCW habitat.]
- Develop ten 10- to 20-acre RCW recruitment sites approximately ½-mile apart (USFWS guidelines) on Compartment 113 (stands 1, 5, 9, 11, 13, 15, 16, 24, 29, 30); rehabilitate old recruitment sites on Compartments 114 (stands 1, 19-22, 31, 32, 58, 59), 117 (stands 3, 5, 6, 8-10, 12, 15, 18, 19, 22, 27, 32-34, 36, 37), 118 (stands 1, 2, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16-19, 23, 25, 28, 32), and 119 (stands 1, 2, 6, 8, 14, 25).
- Create 40 RCW artificial cavities/inserts (at least 4 cavities available for each RCW recruitment site) after thinning and prescribed burning, including boundary signage and tree marking.
- Use a combination of herbicides and mechanical methods to control unwanted vegetation on approximately 2,417 acres within RCW foraging and nesting areas (see Table 2). All hardwoods within the areas are not considered as unwanted vegetation. Hardwoods would remain within riparian areas and on sites where determined to be the best species left in place. Fruit-bearing species would not be targeted for removal and hard mast bearing species (oaks and hickories) would be favored over other hardwood species. Unwanted vegetation also includes invasive species such as privet, kudzu, and wisteria. Treatments (herbicides, mechanical, prescribed fire) needed to control unwanted vegetation would be determined upon post-thinning evaluations. Herbicides would be applied manually (foliar spray or injection); no aerial application of herbicides would occur. When implemented, foliar spray

applications would be applied to unwanted vegetation less than 7 feet in height. Felling with stump treatment applications or injection applications would be used to treat unwanted vegetation over 7 feet in height. Areas with older and/or dense growth of unwanted vegetation may have selective treatments with herbicides prior to prescribed fire applications to better manage the desired control. Some of these areas may also have post prescribed fire selective treatments with herbicides. Areas where prescribed fire controls most of the unwanted vegetation would only have selective spot treatments with herbicides. Some areas may have unwanted vegetation controlled by prescribed fire and the use of herbicides may not be necessary. Herbicide applications will be done with low pressure backpack sprayers and/or cut surface treatments (stump treatment or injection). Once post-thinning herbicide treatments are implemented, periodic prescribed fire is planned for all of the areas to maintain the control of the unwanted vegetation and reduction of ground fuels. Some areas may require periodic selective spot applications with herbicides along with periodic prescribed fire for control of unwanted vegetation. Refer to Section 1.6.2 and Appendix F of the EA for more information on herbicides. Noxious weed control would continue annually until the eradication of the targeted species is obtained. During mechanical treatments, hand-controlled devices (such as chain saws) primarily would be used, with some exceptions where a machine could be used to grind the midstory. The areas planned to have post-thinning evaluation for vegetation control needs are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Stands with the Potential for Herbicide Use under Alternative 2	
Comp.	Stands (acres)
113	1 (25 acres), 4 (17 ac.), 5 (19 ac.), 9 (93 ac.), 11 (38 ac.), 12 (63 ac.), 13 (62 ac.), 15 (52 ac.), 16 (60 ac.), 23 (49 ac.), 24 (46 ac.), 26 (70 ac.), 27 (26 ac.), 29 (16 ac.), 30 (12 ac.)
114	1 (112 ac.), 17 (88 ac.), 18 (30 ac.), 19 (19 ac.), 20 (52 ac.), 21 (38 ac.), 22 (32 ac.), 28 (19 ac.), 31 (25 ac.), 32 (25 ac.), 58 (10 ac.), 59 (10 ac.)
117	3 (61 ac.), 5 (40 ac.), 6 (50 ac.), 8 (28 ac.), 9 (21 ac.), 10 (119 ac.), 15 (30 ac.), 17 (39 ac.), 18 (21 ac.), 19 (14 ac.), 22 (14 ac.), 26 (28 ac.), 27 (26 ac.), 28 (23 ac.), 29 (25 ac.), 32 (34 ac.), 33 (50 ac.), 35 (18 ac.), 36 (25 ac.), 63 (10 ac.), 64 (10 ac.), 65 (10 ac.)
118	1 (15 ac.), 2 (39 ac.), 8 (35 ac.), 10 (10 ac.), 11 (13 ac.), 13 (28 ac.), 14 (33 ac.), 17 (30 ac.), 18 (15 ac.), 19 (35 ac.), 23 (40 ac.), 25 (18 ac.), 28 (21 ac.), 53 (10 ac.), 54 (10 ac.)
119	2 (14 ac.), 6 (30 ac.), 8 (81 ac.), 14 (34 ac.), 25 (10 ac.), 26 (13 ac.), 27 (57 ac.), 30 (12 ac.), 58 (10 ac.)

- Use and maintain the existing permanent road system. Annual maintenance, including blading, graveling/surface replacement, and mowing, and some pre-haul maintenance, including reshaping and ditch work for proper drainage, would occur on existing permanent roads in the project area prior to initiation of RCW habitat restoration activities.
- Construct approximately 1 mile of temporary road on Compartments 113 and 119;
- Reopen and rehabilitate approximately 25.2 miles of temporary roads and associated log landings within the project area to access timber stands. These roads were last used the last time timber was removed from the area (approximately 10 years ago), and reopening them would only involve minor disturbance. Understory vegetation would be cleared from the surfaces of these temporary roads, and gravel would be spread in dips, on slopes exceeding 10 percent, and at intersections with surfaced roads. Table 3 presents a breakdown of the number of miles of existing and new temporary roads to be used in each compartment. In

addition, this table presents the number and acreage of landings to be used in each compartment.

Comp.	No. of Landings (Approx. Total Acres)	Existing Temp. Roads (Reopened) (Miles)	Miles of New Temp. Road Construction
113	30 (7 acres)	4.6	(<) 0.5
114	22 (5 acres)	1.8	0
117	48 (10 acres)	8.0	0
118	27 (5.5 acres)	4.5	0
119	39 (8 acres)	6.3	(<) 0.5
Total	166 (35.5 acres)	25.2	1.0

- Provide nesting structures for squirrels within the recruitment stands: 2 structures within each new RCW recruitment area (20 structures total). These structures would be placed on posts within RCW recruitment stands.
- Restore 2 acres of gully on Compartment 113 stand 9 to improve watershed conditions. This would require the movement of soil to fill in the gully and remove surrounding vegetation. Two dozers and a farm tractor would be used to conduct mechanical preparation in the area. Terraces would be constructed to divert the water. After filling, the area would be reseeded and mulched, and would serve as a temporary wildlife opening. The area would be monitored over the long-term to determine whether these actions are successful.
- Reforest approximately 25 acres of old SPB stands scattered throughout the project area with pine seedlings.
- Develop wildlife viewing areas, which would only include a bench and signage, at two sites: one on Compartment 114 stand 58 and one on Compartment 113 stand 1.

Upon completion of the proposed vegetation management activities, all of the temporary roads would be closed except for administrative use; permanent roads would continue to be maintained as permanent roads. The majority of these temporary roads would be seeded with wildlife mixtures and native grasses and allowed to revegetate. However, some would be permanently maintained as wildlife openings. In addition, roads that access a RCW insert or natural RCW tree would be seeded and maintained.

Mitigation and Monitoring Measures

Mitigation measures are actions taken to lessen adverse impacts or enhance beneficial effects. General mitigation and monitoring measures are listed in Section 2.6 and in Appendix C of the EA. All mitigation and monitoring measures directly related to Alternative 2 are listed below.

Water Quality and Aquatic Species:

- The USFS would stipulate that the contractor avoid use of heavy equipment when soils are wet, such as after a storm event. If work on saturated soils is not preventable, the USFS would require the contractor to use low ground pressure equipment, logging mats, or other techniques.

- Planning and approval of log landing and skid trail locations would ensure that they are located in stable, well-drained areas, away from gullies. Skidding and decking would be limited to designated and approved routes along ridgetops and gentle side slopes to protect sensitive soils (i.e., wet and micaceous soils).
- The USFS would require the contractor to conduct all timber harvest and roadwork activities in accordance with *Georgia's Best Management Practices for Forestry* and Forest Plan standards and guidelines.
- Compacted soils on skid trails, temporary roads, and log landings would be tilled before seeding to increase water infiltration.
- Drainage structures at existing stream crossings would be assessed to determine if maintenance, repair, or replacement is required to accommodate stream discharge and fish passage, and to protect water resources.
- Field-verified wetlands will be avoided to the maximum extent practical. Thinning operations adjacent to the wetland boundaries will ensure that the function and value of the wetland is preserved.
- The USFS would ensure that all erosion-producing activities conducted within Compartment 114 are in compliance with the Georgia Department of Natural Resource's established Total Maximum Daily Load for Gladesville Creek.

Vegetation and Wildlife, Including PETS (Proposed, Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive) Species:

- Log landing and skid trail locations would be reviewed and approved by the USFS prior to harvest to ensure they are appropriately planned to minimize soil impacts and damage to residual trees.
- Compacted soils on skid trails, temporary roads, and log landings would be tilled before seeding to enhance revegetation.
- Certain log landings used for the project would be left open and maintained as wildlife openings over the long-term. These would include landings in:
 - Compartment 113, Stands 9, 13, 15, 26;
 - Compartment 114, Stands 1, 10, 22;
 - Compartment 117, Stands 4, 5, 10, 14, 20, 21;
 - Compartment 118, Stands 6, 14, 17, 20, 22;
 - Compartment 119, Stands 3, 7, 12, 14, 30.
- Fruit trees would be planted within selected wildlife openings, including:
 - Compartment 113, Stand 13;
 - Compartment 114, Stand 1;
 - Compartment 117, Stand 10;
 - Compartment 118, Stand 14; and
 - Compartment 119, Stand 30.

RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

Based on the analysis presented in the *RCW Habitat Restoration Project EA*, I have decided to select Alternative 2 because it best meets the purpose and need and the Forest-wide Goals discussed above. The following is the rationale for my decision.

I first eliminated the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1) since it failed to meet the purpose and need established for the project in several ways. Alternative 1 would result in a violation of the ESA, RCW EIS guidelines, the RCW Recovery Plan, and the current Forest Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. In addition, this alternative may adversely affect the RCW. In addition, since no thinning activities would occur under this alternative, general health of the forest stands in the project area would likely decline gradually, increasing the potential for southern pine beetle infestations. No noxious weed control would occur, and weeds would continue to spread, eventually taking over surrounding forest stands. While the No Action alternative would not directly affect soil and water resources, minor adverse impacts on these resources would continue to occur since gully restoration activities would not occur.

I next eliminated Alternative 3. Vegetation management methods proposed under Alternative 3 would not be as effective as those under Alternatives 2 and 4, and would require more disturbance of the project area due to repeated treatments. Unlike herbicide treatments, midstory vegetation and noxious weeds would not likely be killed as a result of mechanical treatments proposed under Alternative 3, at least initially. As a result, several mechanical release treatments would be required to eliminate these species due to the continual re-growth of selectively cut vegetation. More than one mechanical treatment in the same growing season may be required in some cases, and numerous mechanical treatments would likely be required in each stand over the next four to five years, especially in areas that contain invasive species.

This left Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) and Alternative 4. These alternatives involve the same vegetation management methods, but on different amounts of land. As compared to the Alternative 4, I found Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) superior because it provides a larger amount of habitat for the RCW, better meeting ESA requirements, RCW Recovery Plan objectives, and Forest Plan goals (Goal 51 and Management Prescription 8.D.1), and having a greater beneficial effect on the RCW over the long-term.

Activities proposed under Alternative 2 would enhance the quality of RCW habitat on the forest. Opening up the pine forest through thinning, with a focus on mature pine stands, and conducting midstory control through mechanical and chemical methods would not only improve forest health and reduce threats on RCW clusters from southern pine beetle infestations, but would make the project area more suitable for the RCW nesting and foraging. In combination with past and proposed future prescribed burning, which would maintain midstory control, the vegetation management activities under Alternative 2 would create ideal habitat for the RCW within the project area. Upon completion of vegetation management activities under Alternative 2, 10 to 20 RCW recruitment stands would be established within the project area. Inserts would be placed throughout these stands, which would provide nesting habitat for the species. Alternative 2 would be working toward the recovery objective for the RCW on the Oconee National Forest. In addition, this alternative would be keeping with the direction of the RCW Final EIS and ROD, Recovery Plan, and the ESA.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED IN DETAIL

In addition to the selected alternative (Alternative 2), I considered all of the other alternatives as presented in the EA. A complete description of these alternatives is provided in Chapter 2 of the

EA. Mitigation and monitoring measures describe above would be followed on all action alternatives.

Alternative 1: No Action (Current Management): No vegetative thinning would occur within the project area, and current management of Compartments 113, 114, 117, 118, and 119 would continue. Current management includes periodic prescribed burning, some level of noxious weed control, and other activities permitted in the Forest Plan. There would continue to be some efforts made for the protection and enhancement of the RCW, including monitoring, placement of inserts, and removal of predators and nest cavity competitors; however, no direct efforts to improve the quality and quantity of RCW foraging and nesting habitat would be made. In addition, other resource-related activities, including gully restoration and aggressive noxious weed treatment, would not occur under this alternative.

Alternative 2: RCW Habitat Restoration (Proposed Action; Selected Alternative): This alternative is described above.

Alternative 3: RCW Habitat Restoration without Herbicide Use: This alternative primarily consists of using vegetation manipulation by thinning and midstory control (via mechanical methods and prescribed fire only) to help restore habitat for the RCW within Compartments 113, 114, 117, 118, and 119. Specific activities that would occur under Alternative 3 would be the same as those listed under Alternative 2 above, with the exception that no herbicides would be used to control midstory vegetation or noxious weeds within project area. Instead, hand-controlled devices (such as chain saws) would primarily be used, with some exceptions where a machine could be used to grind the midstory. Prescribed fire would be implemented along with this method, and would be conducted every three to five years, as needed, to eliminate midstory within RCW nesting and foraging areas.

Alternative 4: RCW Habitat Restoration On A Smaller Land Area: This alternative would involve the same activities as described under Alternative 2, but would involve a smaller land area. The following areas would not undergo any of the proposed treatments (with the exception of prescribed fire, which would occur regardless of which alternative is selected):

<u>Compartment</u>	<u>Stands Not Treated</u>
113	5
114	18
117	4, 5, 6, 21, 22, 35
118	10, 11, 16
119	2, 11, 12, 16-18, 26, 30, 31, 58

Table 4 shows a breakdown of the approximate number of acres proposed for thinning in each compartment under Alternative 4.

Table 4. Acres Proposed for Thinning By Compartment under Alternative 4

Comp.	Stands	Total Comp. Acres*	No. Acres to be Thinned*	No. Acres For Each Stand Type*		
				Mature Pine Sawtimber	Immature Pine Sawtimber	Pine Pole Timber/ Precomm.
113	1-4, 7, 9, 11-13, 15, 16, 21, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30	1,283	967	594	161	212
114	1, 3, 7, 10-12, 17, 19-23, 25-28, 31, 32, 58, 59	1,809	715	411	73	231
117	1, 3, 8-10, 12, 14, 15, 17-20, 26-29, 32, 33, 36-38, 63-65	1,505	739	580	65	94
118	1, 2, 4, 6-9, 13, 14, 17-20, 23, 25, 28, 53, 54	1,158	463	268	61	134
119	1, 3, 6-9, 13-15, 22, 24, 25, 27	1,328	615	272	97	246
TOTAL		7,083	3,499	2,125	457	917

*Includes National Forest System lands only.

Since fewer stands are proposed for thinning, the number of log landings constructed and miles of temporary road reopened would be smaller under this alternative. Approximately 137 log landings, totaling 30 acres, would be used; 17.0 miles of temporary roads would be reopened; and 1.0 miles of new temporary roads would be constructed under this alternative. Approximately 2,174 acres would have post-thinning evaluation for vegetation and midstory control needs under Alternative 4 (herbicide use and mechanical methods),.

ALTERNATIVES ELIMINATED FROM DETAILED STUDY

An alternative of improving RCW nesting opportunities by drilling nest holes and placing inserts in the project area, but not conducting vegetation management activities (i.e., thinning), was considered. Although nesting opportunities would be increased, the future planned translocation of RCW would not occur. This alternative was dismissed from further consideration because it does not meet the purpose and need of establishing overall favorable habitat for the RCW on the Forest and complying with the provisions of the ESA, the EIS and ROD for the *Management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and its Habitat on National Forests in the Southern Region*, the revised *Recovery Plan for the Red-cockaded Woodpecker*, and the direction established in the revised Forest Plan (2004). Without habitat management and restoration, the RCW would not migrate into the project area regardless of whether additional nesting opportunities were provided, and the RCW recovery objectives would not be met on the Oconee National Forest (Piedmont Recovery Unit).

PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

A team of Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest personnel conducted public involvement with the primary objective of discovering the concerns of the public. USFS personnel took the following steps to gather issues from the public:

- Scoping for this project began when the USFS hosted an open house and field trip on March 29, 2002, to which all cooperative agencies (Federal and State), conservation groups, and

environmental organizations, such as Georgia Forestwatch and the Sierra Club, were invited for a presentation and site visit of the proposed project sites. Sixteen people participated on the field trip.

- On June 17, 2002, a scoping letter explaining the proposal to improve the habitat for translocation of RCW to meet the requirements of the Recovery Plan and RCW EIS within site specific information was mailed to 65 individuals and organizations that had previously expressed interest in the management of the Oconee Ranger District.
- Simultaneous with the mailing, the proposed action appeared in both print and Internet versions of the quarterly Scheduled of Proposed Actions for the Chattahoochee –Oconee National Forest in Georgia 2002.
- A legal notice requesting comments was also published in the *Eatonton Messenger* in June 2002.
- A total of 4 written responses were received during scoping.
- A second scoping letter for the proposed vegetation management was sent out to 65 individuals on April 3, 2003 to revise the project site to the Sub-HMA with a change of compartments. The original proposed action was for the HMA-Jones-Putnam County; the second scoping letter identified the Jasper County area Compartments 113, 114, 117, 118, and 119. Only 1 response was received.
- A second legal notice was placed in the *Eatonton Messenger* in April 2003.
- Another open house meeting was scheduled for April 28, 2003 at the district office. Twenty people attended the meeting, at which the Forest displayed maps of the proposed area and gave a short presentation on the proposal.
- The second scoping period announcement was also placed on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions for the period of April 1 to June 2003. No written comments were received. Katherine Groves, John Moore, and Phillip Jordan gave verbal agreement in support of the project. Jimmy Rickard, biologist for USFWS, also concurred with the proposed action.
- The EA was made available for the 30-day notice and comment period from August 11, 2004 to September 17, 2004. A legal notice summarizing the proposed project and notifying the public of the availability of the EA for comment published in *The Eatonton Messenger* on August 12, 2004 and August 19, 2004. The EA was made available to the public on the Forest's Internet site. Copies of the EA also were mailed to those individuals that had responded by mail during the scoping period. One comment was received and reviewed by the interdisciplinary team. This comment, and the interdisciplinary team's response to this comment, is provided in Appendix G of the EA.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on the EA, I have determined that Alternative 2, with the mitigating measures and management requirements applied, is not a major Federal action and, either individually or cumulatively, will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, the preparation of an EIS is not necessary. This determination is based upon the following factors found at 40 CFR 1508.27 (b):

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered. The proposed actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of human environment. (EA pages 1-7 through 1-17; 3-2 through 3-42; and Appendix F).
2. Public health and safety are minimally affected by the proposed actions. (EA pages 1-14 through 1-15 and Appendix F).
3. Within the limited context of the planned actions along with the restrictions and mitigation measures (EA Section 2.6 and Appendix C), there will be no significant effect on any unique characteristics or features of the geographic area. (EA pages 1-7 through 1-17; 3-2 through 3-42; and Appendix F).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial based on new or unusual methods, tools, or quantity of activities being approved. (Issues from scoping efforts: EA pages 1-6 through 1-17). None of the actions involves an irreversible commitment of resources.
5. There are no known effects on the human environment that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. Numerous vegetation management projects of a similar nature have been completed on the Forest such that the environmental consequences (EA pages 1-7 through 1-17; 3-2 through 3-42; and Appendix F) of this project are well understood.
6. The actions in this decision will not set a precedent influencing approval of future actions with significant effects.
7. The possible cumulative effects of the proposed actions have been analyzed with consideration for past and reasonably foreseeable future activities on adjacent private and public lands. Each environmental component in Chapter 3 of the EA includes consideration of cumulative effects. The context and intensity of cumulative impacts over space and time will not be significant. (EA pages 3-2 through 3-42 and Appendix F).
8. The proposed actions 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 historical resources. This is based on findings of site-specific cultural resource surveys of the project area and concurrence by the State of Georgia Historic Preservation office as per Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. (Heritage Resources Report in Project Folder and SHPO concurrence in Appendix D of the EA).
9. Implementing this decision will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or result in loss of any other species' viability, or create significant trends toward Federal listing of the species under the ESA. This determination is based site-specific surveys, the Biological Evaluation for the RCW Habitat Improvement Project (Appendix E of the EA), and concurrence from the USFWS under Section 7(a) (2) of the ESA. (USFWS concurrence in Project Folder).

10. None of the actions threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local laws imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed actions will be implemented in a way that is consistent with the standards and management requirements established in the Forest Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, and in site-specific mitigation measures. (EA Section 2.6 and Appendix C).

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

National Forest Management Act

This decision is consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 regarding the effective management, use, and protection of the natural resources of the area affected by this project.

Forest Plan Consistency

I have determined that all actions of the selected alternative will be consistent with the management requirements for the revised Forest Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, January 2004. This includes general standards of the Forest Plan and the specific management direction for lands in Management Prescriptions 8.D.1 (RCW Sub-Habitat Management Area) and 11 (Riparian Corridors) as designated by the Forest Plan.

Vegetative Manipulation

Actions involving vegetative manipulation will meet the following applicable requirements of 36 CFR 219.27 (b):

1. The methods used are best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area; potential environmental, biological, cultural, aesthetic, engineering, and economic impacts, have been considered in this determination.
2. No permanent impairment of site productivity is expected from the actions. Mitigation measures specified in the EA were designed to achieve these goals.
3. Actions were chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.
4. Actions will provide the desired effects on water quantity and quality, soil productivity, wildlife and fish habitat, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and other resource yields. Standards and guidelines along with *Georgia's Best Management Practices for Forestry* will be followed, and actions will comply with the Clean Water Act. The desired effects for each of these factors are described in the EA.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

The Decision is subject to appeal, pursuant to the USFS regulations 36 CFR 215.11 by those who provided comments or otherwise expressed interest in this particular proposal during the 30-day public comment period. A written Notice of Appeal of this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, "Content of Notice of Appeal," including the reasons for appeal. Appeals must be postmarked or received in duplicate within 45 days after the legal notice publication date

in *The Eatonton Messenger*. The appeal should be sent to: Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 1755 Cleveland Highway, Gainesville, Georgia, 30501.

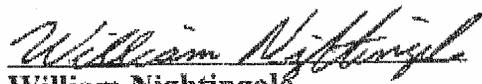
IMPLEMENTATION DATE

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.

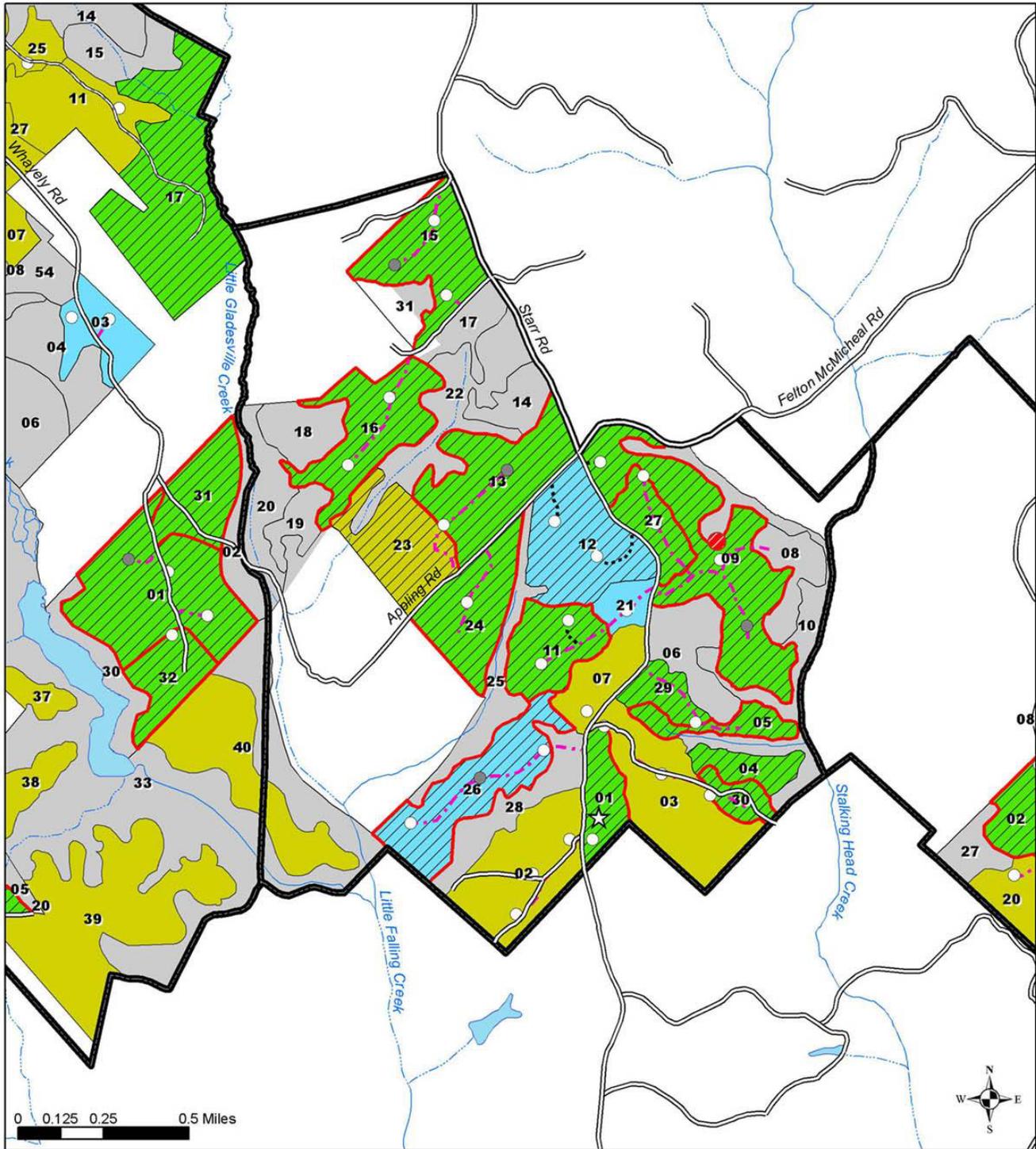
CONTACT INFORMATION

For additional information concerning this decision or on the appeals process, contact William Nightingale, Oconee District Ranger at: U.S. Forest Service, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, Oconee Ranger District, 1199 Madison Highway, Eatonton, Georgia 31024, or phone (706) 485-7110, or by email at bnightingale@fs.fed.us.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL APPROVAL


William Nightingale
Oconee District Ranger

9/30/04
Date



Legend

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Forest Service Land Compartments Proposed Thinning Immature Loblolly Mature Loblolly Pole Timber / Precommercial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Herbicide Use and/or Mechanical Methods for Control of Midstory/ Noxious Weeds Potential RCW Recruitment Sites Wildlife Viewing Area Log Landing Log Landing to be Maintained as a Wildlife Opening 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gully Restoration Site New Temp. Road Open Existing Temp. Road Major Roads Streams Waterbodies
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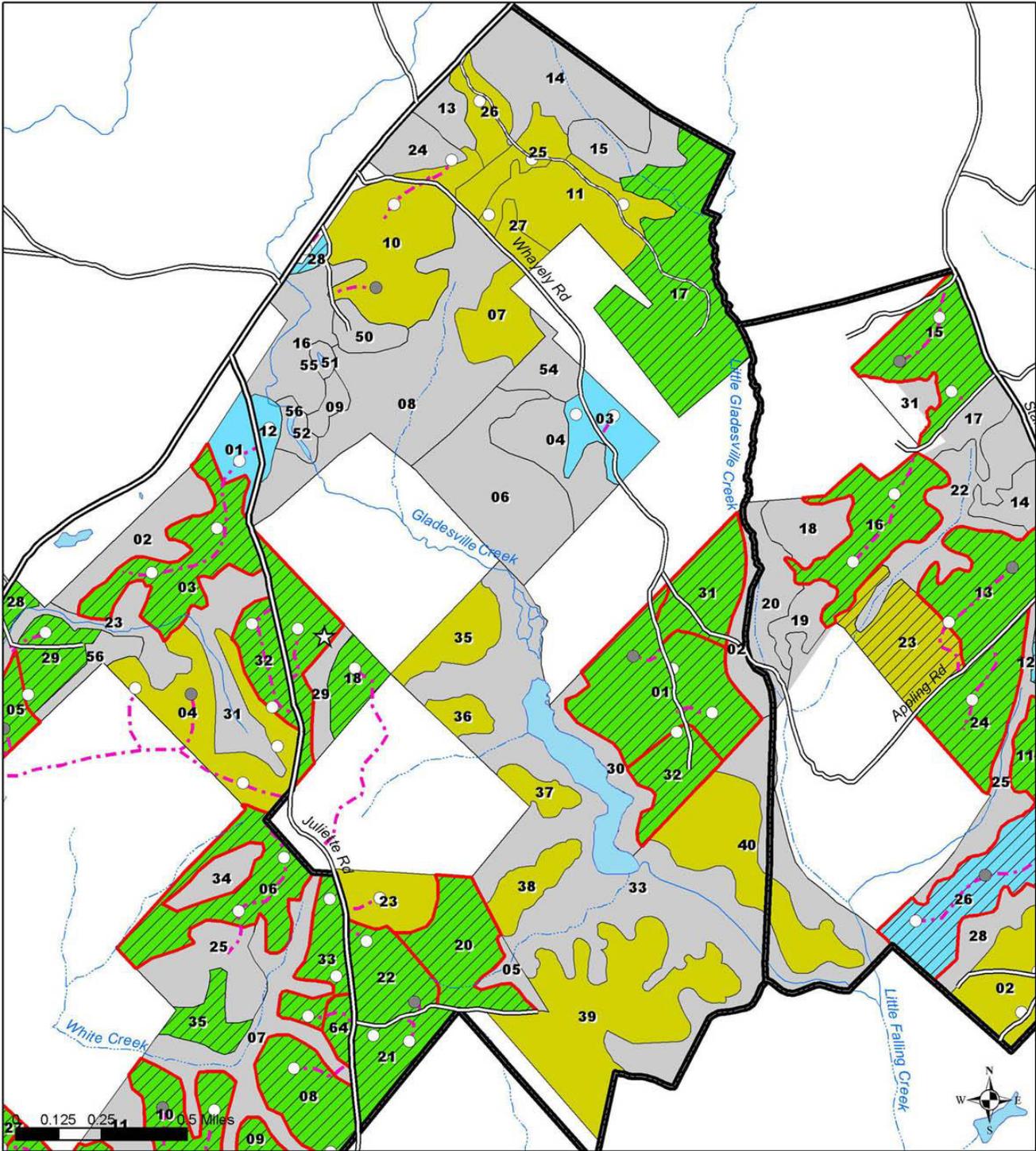
Alternative 2 - Compartment 113

Oconee National Forest

Project Area



Data Sources: USFS, 2004; ESRI, 2002.
Last Revised July 2004



Legend

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Forest Service Land | Herbicide Use and/or Mechanical Methods for Control of Midstory/ Noxious Weeds | Gully Restoration Site |
| Compartments | Potential RCW Recruitment Sites | New Temp. Road |
| Proposed Thinning | Wildlife Viewing Area | Open Existing Temp. Road |
| Immature Loblolly | Log Landing | Major Roads |
| Mature Loblolly | Log Landing to be Maintained as a Wildlife Opening | Streams |
| Pole Timber / Precommercial | | Waterbodies |

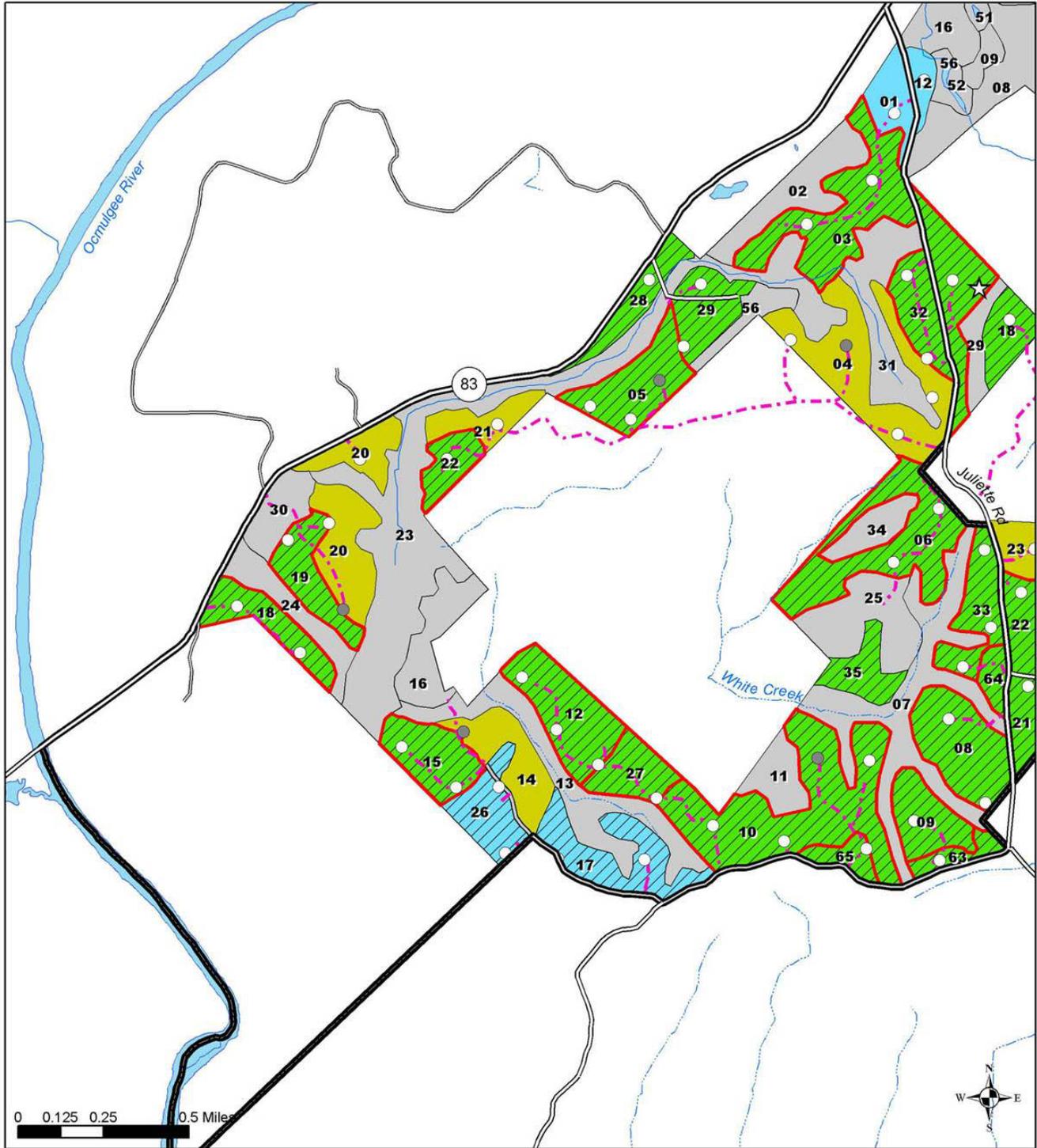
Alternative 2 - Compartment 114

Oconee National Forest

Project Area

GEORGIA

Data Sources: USFS, 2004; ESRI, 2002. Last Revised July 2004



Legend

Forest Service Land	Herbicide Use and/or Mechanical Methods for Control of Midstory/ Noxious Weeds	Gully Restoration Site
Compartments	Potential RCW Recruitment Sites	New Temp. Road
Proposed Thinning	Wildlife Viewing Area	Open Existing Temp. Road
Immature Loblolly	Log Landing	Major Roads
Mature Loblolly	Log Landing to be Maintained as a Wildlife Opening	Streams
Pole Timber / Precommercial		Waterbodies

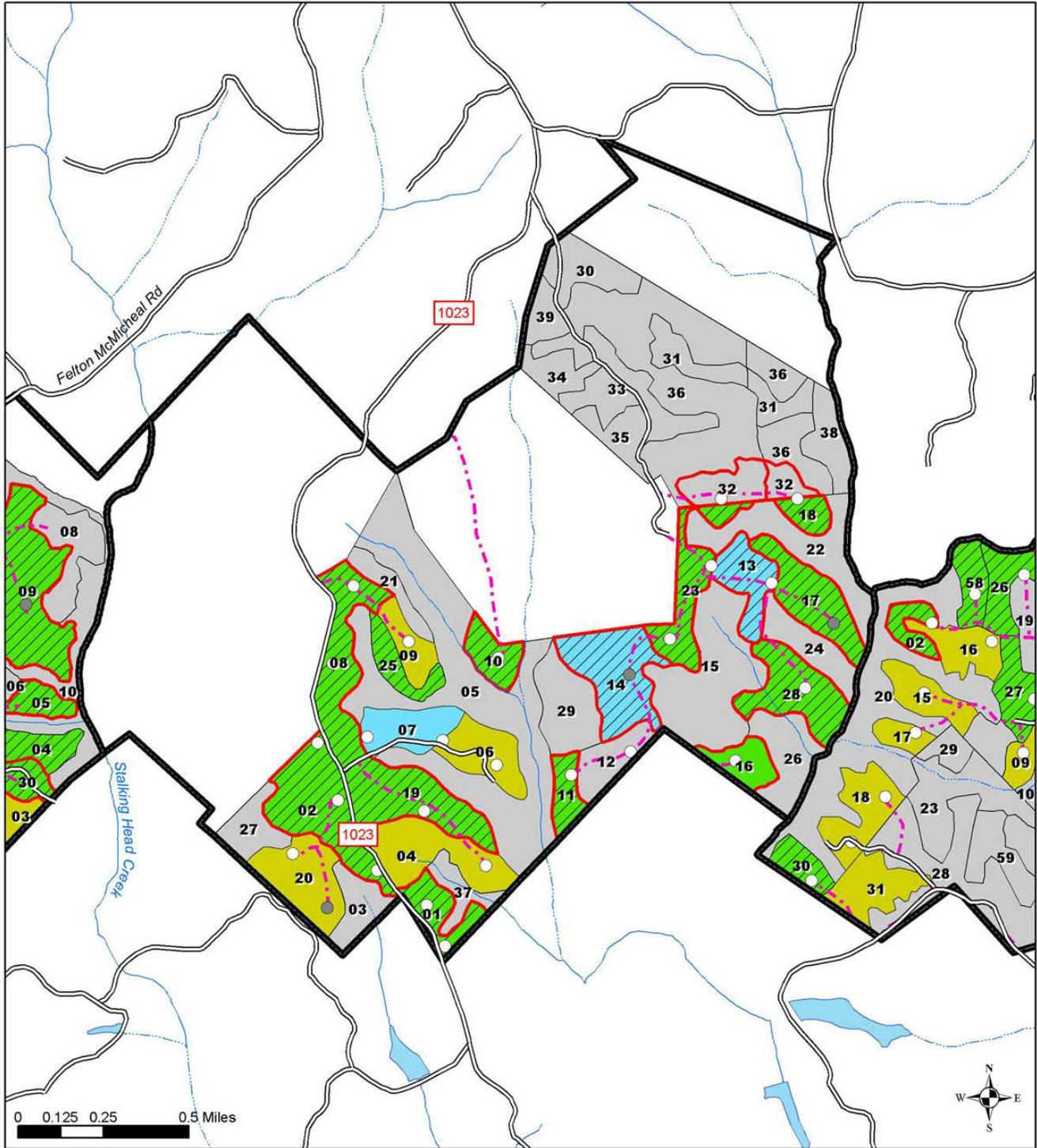
Alternative 2 - Compartment 117

Project Area

Oconee National Forest

GEORGIA

Data Sources: USFS, 2004; ESRI, 2002. Last Revised July 2004



Legend

Forest Service Land	Herbicide Use and/or Mechanical Methods for Control of Midstory/ Noxious Weeds	Gully Restoration Site
Compartments	Potential RCW Recruitment Sites	New Temp. Road
Proposed Thinning	Wildlife Viewing Area	Open Existing Temp. Road
Immature Loblolly	Log Landing	Major Roads
Mature Loblolly	Log Landing to be Maintained as a Wildlife Opening	Streams
Pole Timber / Precommercial		Waterbodies

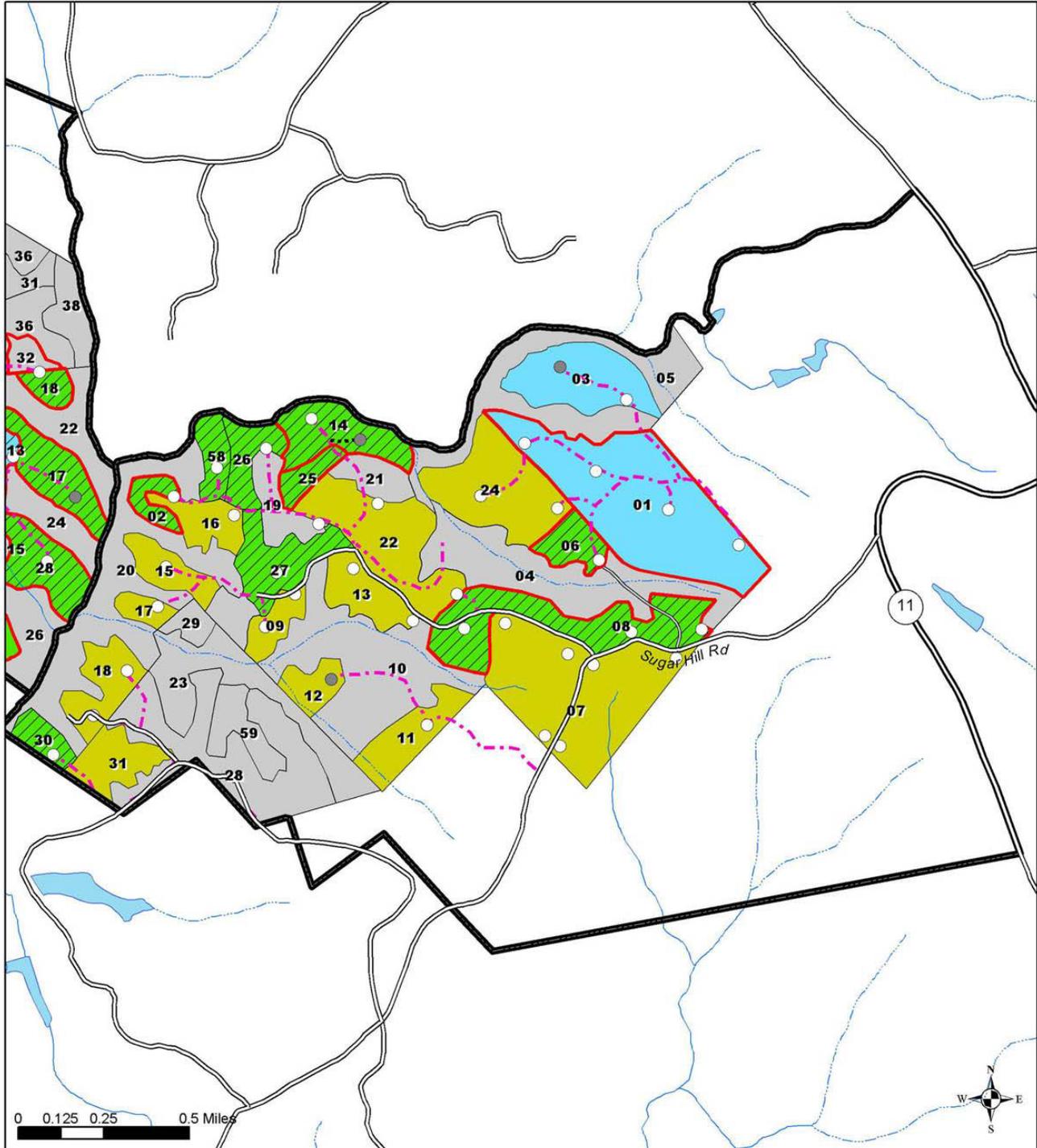
Alternative 2 - Compartment 118

Project Area

Oconee National Forest

GEORGIA

Data Sources: USFS, 2004; ESRI, 2002. Last Revised July 2004



Legend

Forest Service Land	Herbicide Use and/or Mechanical Methods for Control of Midstory/ Noxious Weeds	Gully Restoration Site
Compartments	Potential RCW Recruitment Sites	New Temp. Road
Proposed Thinning	Wildlife Viewing Area	Open Existing Temp. Road
Immature Loblolly	Log Landing	Major Roads
Mature Loblolly	Log Landing to be Maintained as a Wildlife Opening	Streams
Pole Timber / Precommercial		Waterbodies

Alternative 2 - Compartment 119

Oconee National Forest

Project Area

Data Sources: USFS, 2004; ESRI, 2002.
Last Revised July 2004.