

DECISION MEMO
Rock Creek Aquatic Habitat Improvement Project

USDA Forest Service
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
Conasauga Ranger District
Murray County, Georgia

DECISION

I have decided to implement a project to enhance aquatic habitat in a portion of Rock Creek, a tributary of Holly Creek in Murray County, Georgia. Approximately 12 stream structures will be constructed, including several wedge dams, K-dams, and cover logs. Hand labor and a backhoe will be used to move large boulders and logs into place in the streambank. No streambank trees or other vegetation will be removed during construction. Beginning in August 2007, approximately 4-5 structures will be constructed each summer during low-flow periods. The 1 mile segment of stream to improve begins just above the Forest Service Road 3A crossing.

PURPOSE AND NEED

Existing condition - Rock Creek contains shallow stretches which become critically low for aquatic species during drought periods. A former crossing on FS Road 3A was a multiple barrel culvert structure that restricted water flow, causing flooding and deposition of rock and debris upstream from the crossing. This area in particular is now lacking in natural stream structure because of the effects of the old crossing. Replacement of the culverts in 2005 with a large bottomless structure restored free passage for fish and other aquatic organisms.

Desired condition - There is a need to improve the habitat for aquatic species in this stretch of Rock Creek now that the road crossing causing impacts to the aquatic habitat has been removed. The purpose of this project is to restore natural stream structure by creating deeper pools, removing sediment by flushing action, adding cover for fish, and adding substrate and food for aquatic organisms.

Proposal to meet desired condition - The addition of large, woody debris in the form of cover logs or instream structures will accomplish all these objectives, as well as creating bends or meanders in the stream. These meanders, along with deeper pools and improved cover can greatly improve aquatic productivity. The primary movement of sediments is short-term in duration and usually shifts materials a short distance downstream, creating the beginning of a meander.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION

These actions are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment because they fall under the intent of FSH 1909.15, Category 7 of section 31.2, "Modification or maintenance of stream or lake aquatic habitat improvement structures using native materials or normal practices."

This categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement was initiated by sending a scoping letter to approximately 90 interested parties on February 2, 2007. The project has also been identified on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Schedule of Proposed Actions. Scoping both internally and externally raised no concerns that were determined to cause extraordinary circumstances.

FOREST PLAN CONSISTENCY

The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) identifies forest-wide goals for achieving healthy aquatic habitats. These include:

- Goal 26: Restore and/or maintain aquatic ecosystems in amounts, arrangements, and conditions capable of supporting viable populations of all native and desired nonnative species of aquatic flora and fauna (Forest Plan, page 2-21).

This project will restore conditions capable of supporting viable populations of trout in Rock Creek.

- Objective 26.2: Inventory annually, on a representative sample basis, 10 percent of perennial stream miles for biota (including nonnative species) and/or habitat improvement needs.

An aquatic species survey was conducted in Rock Creek in fall 2006. Three 100 m sections of the stream were electrofished. A moderate population of 3-4 inch rainbow trout and very few larger fish were present. This indicated a need for year-round cover and structure. Post-implementation monitoring will take place after construction is complete and thereafter on a 3-4 year rotation.

The area proposed for treatment falls within the Riparian Corridor (Management Prescription 11). I have reviewed the direction provided under this management prescription and have determined that this project is consistent with the direction found for Management Prescription 11 (Forest Plan, pages 3-171 through 3-182).

REVIEW OF EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

I have considered the resources found in the project area and have determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the project to have significant effects. The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist. For the list of resource conditions I have considered, see the Project File.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision complies with all applicable laws and regulations. For the laws and regulations I have considered, see the Project File.

APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 (f).

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision will be implemented beginning in August 2007.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For further information about this project contact Ruth Stokes, Conasauga Ranger District, at (706)-695-6736 ext 105.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL SIGNATURE AND DATE

/s/ Michele H. Jones

MICHELE H. JONES

District Ranger

August 9, 2007

DATE

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