



File Code: 5100/1900

Date: January 4, 2004

Dear Interested Persons:

I am requesting comments for the **2006 Prescribed Burning Program** on the Oconee Ranger District of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. The proposed projects involve prescribed fire activities in 6 separate Watershed Management areas on the Oconee Ranger District as identified by the Watershed and Acreage Table below. These Project areas are separate and independent, and the appropriate National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) documentation will be written for each management area.

| WATERSHED | ACRES | COMPARTMENTS |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------------------------|
| Ocmulgee River Rum Creek | 4,210 | 110, 111, 120, Hitchiti |
| Ocmulgee Big Sandy Creek | 4,378 | 102, 103, 104, 107 |
| Murder Creek | 2,194 | 142, 143 |
| Little River Lower | 3,697 | 154, 158, 159 |
| Apalachee River Lower | 1,767 | 184, 192, 196 |
| Oconee River Greenbriar Creek | 4,500 | 174, 175, 176, 180, 188 |

Reasons for proposing a prescribed burning project for these Watershed Management areas:

1. **Controlling the understory.** Many of these areas lie within the red-cockaded woodpecker habitat management area (RCW HMA). Within the HMA, burning is proposed to control the understory growth of the stand and to protect colony sites or potential colony sites for the endangered species.
2. **Removing slash build-up.** Fuels, such as pine needles, dead trees, broken limbs, blow down trees, etc. have been accumulating over a period of time. These fuels need to be removed to protect the stands from a potential wildfire. Depending on weather conditions, a wildfire can pose a serious threat to trees and neighboring lands. Prescribed burning these stands under controlled situations protects the stands as well as neighboring private lands from a damaging wildfire.
3. **Increasing foraging area.** Wildlife species prefer to browse on new succulent growth. Most of the new growth within the understory of the stands is unreachable (too high) for some wildlife species. Prescribed burning increases the available browse and foraging for a variety of wildlife species, ie. turkey, deer, quail. etc. Following a burn, new growth will resprout providing new food sources for wildlife.
4. **Improving access and visuals.** The stand's understory vegetation decreases the viewing and access into the stands. As people drive by on the roads viewing capability into the stands is approximately 20 feet. Following a prescribed burn the viewing capability will increase to as much as 75 feet or more, creating an open park-like atmosphere. The openness of the stands increases the opportunities for wildlife viewing, and hunter or hiker access.



5. **Increasing stand diversity.** Burning helps to improve the overall composition of the stand. More herbaceous plants, as well as some tree species, will begin growing in the understory following a burn.
6. **Improving wildlife habitat.** Periodic fire tends to favor understory species that require a more open habitat. A mosaic of burned and unburned areas tend to maximize “edge effect” which promotes a large and varied wildlife population. Deer, dove, quail and turkey are game species that benefit from prescribed fires.

The proposed action of prescribed burning on the Oconee Ranger District accomplishes several desired future conditions as stated in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP; January 2004). Listed are some of the goals that will be accomplished through these project proposals:

1. Goal 51 – Contribute to the conservation and recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*) until species viability is assured throughout its range and it is no longer listed as an endangered species under the endangered species act.
2. Goal 58 – Reduce the risks and consequences of wildfire through fuel treatments that restore and maintain conditions of the fire regime Condition Class 1 to the extent practicable.
3. Goal 1 – Contribute to the viability of native and other desirable wildlife species.
4. Goal 3 – Enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types.
5. Goal 31 – Provide a spectrum of high quality, nature-based recreation settings and opportunities, that reflect the unique or exceptional resources of the Forest and the interests of the recreating public on an environmentally sustainable, financially sound, and operationally effective basis. Adapt management of recreation facilities and opportunities as needed to shift limited resources to those opportunities.

Attached is a general vicinity map of the Watershed Management areas for the prescribed burning project proposals. More detailed maps are available upon request at the district office (address on the letterhead). Additional information on prescribed burning can be accessed at www.fs.fed.us/database/feis.

As required by the National Environmental Policy Act, I am seeking comments for the project. An environmental analysis is being prepared for the project(s) in accordance with Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 Section 31.1; it is anticipated that a Decision Memo will be written for each project.

If you would like to comment or require additional information about these project proposals, please contact the Oconee Ranger District. Comments must be postmarked or received by **February 18th, 2004**. Your comments need to be as specific as possible and include the following information:

1. Name, address, and (if possible) telephone number;
2. Title of the project (Burning Project, etc.) on which comment is being submitted, and;
3. Specific facts or comments along with supporting reasons that I should consider in reaching a final decision.

Your comments can be sent to the address on the letterhead. If you have any questions regarding this project please contact Tony Wild, Mike Caldwell or myself at the District Office between 8:00 am and 4:30 pm Monday through Friday.

Sincerely,

WILLIAM B. NIGHTINGALE
District Ranger

Enclosure(s)