

DECISION MEMO

Cossatot Old-Growth Fuel Reduction Prescribed Burns

Polk County, Arkansas

**Mena - Oden Ranger District
Ouachita National Forest
U.S. Forest Service**

October 2008

I. Background

Fuel reduction prescribed burning (3,103 acres) was proposed in the Cossatot Old Growth Restoration Area in Compartments 956, 974, 977, and 978. The four prescribed burn areas are located in Township 4 South, Range 30 West. See attached map. Both dormant season and growing season prescribed burning was proposed. Approximately 4.1 miles of fireline would need to be reopened or constructed to contain fire within four individual burn areas.

Growing Season

Prescribed burning involves application of controlled, moderate to high intensity fire to control competing vegetation (hardwoods), maintain open forest conditions, increase understory species diversity, reduce accumulated leaf litter and preparation of sites for seeding and/or hand planting. Site preparation burns are implemented during the time between leaf emergence and leaf fall. Vegetation three inches and less in diameter at the ground level would be targeted for higher rootstock eradication. This will result in less competition for pine seedlings and other desirable fire dependant species, while creating an open understory, stimulating growth of native grasses and forbs, and increasing foraging for browsing animals.

Dormant Season

Prescribed burning involves application of controlled, low intensity fire to reduce accumulated fuels, stimulate growth of native vegetation, and improve wildlife habitat. There would be approximately 80 percent coverage in areas to be burned, with expected fuel reduction of approximately 30 percent. Some duff would be retained for soil protection. Vegetation 1^{1/4}-inches and less in diameter at breast height (dbh) would be targeted for reduction to create an open understory, stimulating growth of native grasses and forbs, and increasing foraging for browsing animals.

Fireline Establishment

Approximately 0.5 miles of fireline would be constructed using mechanical equipment (dozer). An additional 0.3 miles would be constructed by hand to minimize effects to scenic integrity within MA20. Approximately 3.3 miles of existing fireline would be reopened and bladed (reconstructed). All firelines would be seeded and water barred following use in order to reduce the potential for soil erosion. Firelines crossing perennial streams and other streams with defined channels that are at least one foot wide and three inches deep would be constructed using hand tools at right angles to the channel. This handline would extend 100 feet from each bank on perennial streams and 30 feet from each bank on other streams with defined channels.

Prescribed burning and treatments preceding the burns, would maintain 10-20 percent of hard mast producers. The pretreatments, if any, would retain all soft mast producing species present in order to sustain their presence subsequent to prescribed burning.

These prescribed burn areas are located within two 6th level watersheds (10,000 to 40,000 acres) and were analyzed for cumulative effects.

II. Decision

My decision is to approve the 3,103 acres of national forest land that was proposed for a dormant season prescribed burn initially, followed by growing season burning after the fuel load is reduced. The prescribed burn will be conducted in Management Areas (MA) 9 – Water and Riparian Communities, MA 20 – Wild and Scenic River Corridors, and 21 – Old Growth Restoration (Pine-Grass Emphasis), in order to achieve the goals and objectives of the Revised Forest Plan. In particular, Maintain or restore community diversity; OBJ07 – Increase cumulative total area being restored to shortleaf pine-bluestem grass or shortleaf pine-oak woodland conditions to 350,000 acres by 2021 (USDA Forest Service, Part II).

My decision is based on a review of the record that shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views and the acknowledgement of incomplete or unavailable information. The record includes the following documents specific to scientific information:

- Biological Evaluation
- Heritage Resource findings
- VSMOKE Analysis
- Aquatic Cumulative Effects Analysis

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment as it falls within the category identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2(6) – *Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service level D)*. I have determined that this Project does not involve any extraordinary circumstances (36 CFR § 220.6), which would cause the Project to have significant effects. This determination is based on the following:

- a. **Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species:** The proposed project has been evaluated and included in a biological evaluation dated August 26, 2008. In the biological evaluation the District Biologist determined that implementation of proposed activities would have “no impact” on the Sensitive Species Ouachita shiner, Kiamichi shiner, and Narrowleaf ironweed; and “may impact individuals, but not likely to cause a trend to federal listing or loss of viability” for the Sensitive Species Small-footed bat, Diana fritillary, Caddo Mountain salamander, Ouachita leadplant, Waterfall's sedge, Southern lady's slipper, Ozark chinquapin, Pineoak jewelflower and Palmer's cornsalad.
- b. **Flood plains, wetlands or municipal watersheds.** There are approximately 67 acres of prescribed burning treatment area soil classified as floodplain 100-year occurrence. This decision would not adversely affect this floodplain soil, or any public water supply surface source or wetlands.
- c. **Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas or national recreation areas.** The Caney Creek Wilderness Class I Area lies adjacent to the eastern boundary of the prescribed burn area. This decision would not adversely affect the wilderness.
- d. **Inventoried roadless areas.** This area occurs on national forest land categorized as ‘roaded’.
- e. **Research natural areas.** This area is not categorized as a natural area.
- f. **American Indians and Alaska Native religious or culture sites.** A categorical exclusion checklist was processed for the prescribed burning under the Programmatic Agreement, Section C part 3, and signed on June 27, 2008. No tribal concerns were identified.
- g. **Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas.** See section ‘f’. Protection of heritage resources is part of the review process. Known existing heritage resources will be protected. If any additional heritage resources are discovered during treatment, mitigation measures will be taken to protect them.

No other extraordinary circumstances related to the project were identified.

III. Public Involvement

A letter notice of proposed action for the Project was mailed to individuals and organizations on the District NEPA mailing list on August 15, 2008 inviting comments and input. Legal notice of the proposed Project and request for comments was published August 20, 2008 in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* newspaper. One comment supporting the project was received in response to the mailing. No comments were submitted during the 30-day comment period.

IV. Findings Required by Other Laws

This decision is consistent with the 2005 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Ouachita National Forest as required by the National Forest Management Act. The Project was designed in conformance with Revised Forest Plan standards. The Project is in full compliance with the National Forest Management Act, the Antiquities Act and the Endangered Species Act.

Soil, slope, or other watershed conditions will not be irreversibly damaged. Streams and streambanks will be protected from detrimental changes in water temperature, blockages of water courses, and deposits of sediment where the proposed activity is likely to seriously and adversely affect water conditions or fish habitat.

V. Implementation and Appeal Opportunities

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 because no comments expressing concerns or only supportive comments were received during the 30-day notice and comment period for this project. No one has standing to appeal. As provided in 36 CFR § 215.9 this decision may be implemented immediately after publication of the legal notice of this decision in the newspaper of record.

VI. Contact Person

For further information concerning this decision memo contact Becky Finzer at the Mena Ranger District office, 479-394-2382 or 1603 Hwy 71 North, Mena, Arkansas.

VII. Signature and Date

/s/ Jim E. Zornes

Date: 10/08/08

JIM E. ZORNES
District Ranger

Attachment: Project Area Map