



File Code: 1950

Date: August 15, 2014

Dear Interested Party:

This project announcement letter serves to initiate scoping for three amendments to the Land and Resource Management Plan (“Plan”) for the Ouachita National Forest. The current Plan was prepared and published in 2005 under direction contained in 36 CFR 217. Direction for amending National Forest Plans is now contained in 36 CFR 219, which became effective May 9, 2012. I invite you to participate by commenting on the proposed amendments described in this letter.

Proposed Plan Amendment #3

The Forest Service proposes to amend project planning design criterion AQ004, which currently restricts national forest managers from using prescribed fire on Ouachita National Forest system lands in a given county while that county has a burn ban in place. AQ004 would be changed from “*Burning will not be conducted when county burn bans are in effect*” (Plan, p. 73) to “*When a county burn ban is in in place, communication between the Forest Service and appropriate county official will be documented prior to the ignition of prescribed fire on National Forest System lands.*”

Purpose of the Amendment

Design criterion AQ004 seemed sensible at the time it was included in the 2005 Plan and probably still makes intuitive sense to many people. Experience since 2005, however, has shown that county burn bans are often put in force under conditions that are still well within parameters for *safe and effective* controlled burns on the Ouachita National Forest conducted under the supervision of qualified fire management officers and burn bosses. (Most county judges or commissioners whose counties include lands of the Ouachita National Forest have indicated that they have no concern over the proposed change to AQ004; in fact, many officials were surprised to learn that the Forest Service had made themselves subject to bans that are intended for the general public.)

Based on a review by Fire Management staff, the current direction in AQ004 is unique in the Southern Region of the Forest Service to the Ouachita National Forest: no other national forest in the region has this self-imposed limitation. Coordination with county officials regarding prescribed burns planned on lands of the Ouachita National Forest is standard practice and would continue even if this design criterion were amended; in fact, the new requirement would be to document such coordination when it takes place prior to use of prescribed fire on the Ouachita National Forest during a county burn ban.



Need for the Amendment

A Plan amendment to change direction regarding use of prescribed fire during county burn bans would provide more opportunities to achieve Forest Plan objectives and desired conditions for ecosystems (most terrestrial ecosystems have a fire regime needed to maintain forest health and habitat conditions) and fuel loading. Under the current self-imposed restrictions, Forest Service managers forego many opportunities to use prescribed fire on days and under conditions that are well within acceptable parameters for the well-trained and supervised burn crews deployed by the Ouachita National Forest. Annually, the level of prescribed fire completed on the Forest is considerably less than that projected by the 2005 Plan. Making additional days potentially available for use of prescribed fire will give managers additional opportunities to achieve desired ecological conditions, including reduced fuel loads, across the Forest.

Proposed Plan Amendment #4

The Forest Service proposes to change project planning design criterion TE005 (Plan p. 77), from:

“Potential project level impacts on individual American Burying Beetles (ABBs) will be reduced by using the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s current bait-away or trap-and-relocate protocols”

to:

“Project planning will adhere to the Conservation Plan and current Programmatic Biological Opinion regarding American Burying Beetles (ABBs) on the Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests.”

Purpose of the Amendment

Subsequent to publication of the 2005 Revised Forest Plans for both national forests, staff of the Ouachita and Ozark-St. Francis National Forests completed a conservation plan for the American Burying Beetle. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a revised Programmatic Biological Opinion in May 2010 regarding the Forest Plans in question and the conservation plan for this endangered species. The Conservation Plan includes areas designated for American Burying Beetle conservation (to be achieved by active management) in Arkansas and Oklahoma. For more information about this Conservation Plan and Programmatic Biological Opinion, contact Mary Lane at melane@fs.fed.us.

Need for the Amendment

The 2005 design criterion is no longer valid and needs to be replaced with the most current scientific consensus regarding this species’ conservation needs on the Ouachita National Forest.

Proposed Plan Amendment #5

The Forest Service proposes to reallocate approximately 12,802 acres in Scott County, Arkansas, to Management Area 22 (Renewal of the Shortleaf Pine-Bluestem Grass Ecosystem and Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) Habitat in Arkansas). These acres lie just north of the existing MA 22 boundary in Scott County would be *transferred* from MA 14 to MA 22. See the map attached to this letter.

Purpose of the Amendment

The purpose of this Plan amendment is to increase the available habitat for Red-cockaded Woodpeckers (RCW), an endangered species that benefits from the landscape management conducted under MA 22 direction. Making these adjustments will also facilitate meeting the overall desired conditions and objectives for MA 22, including restoring more of the highly diverse shortleaf pine-bluestem ecosystem.

Need for the Amendment

From time to time, management area boundaries need to be adjusted to reflect changed conditions and/or new information. RCWs on the Ouachita National Forest have been steadily increasing in overall numbers, reproductive success and other parameters since 1998, reflecting steady improvement in the ecosystem characteristics needed for this and many other native species to thrive. Soon they will very likely occupy the block of land in Scott County proposed for re-designation as part of MA 22, and their habitat will need to be managed in accordance with the RCW Recovery Plan. Making the proposed boundary changes will better align these national forest lands to achieve desired conditions and objectives, including habitat management and long-term recovery of the RCW.

Invitation to Comment

Scoping is not limited to a single point in time. We will continue to accept and consider comments until decisions are made. However, comments will be most helpful if they are received early in the process. Specific comments will help us identify environmental issues associated with implementation as well as alternative ways to meet Forest plan objectives and desired conditions. Your involvement will enable us to better assess concerns of the public.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will become a part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the Agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

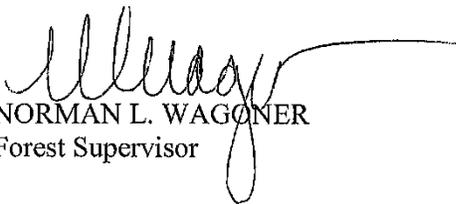
How to Comment

Specific written comments should be addressed to Forest Supervisor, PO Box 1270, Hot Springs, AR 71902 or faxed to (501) 321-5353. Hand-delivered comments may be made at the Federal Building, 2nd Floor, 100 Reserve Street from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm weekdays, excluding holidays.

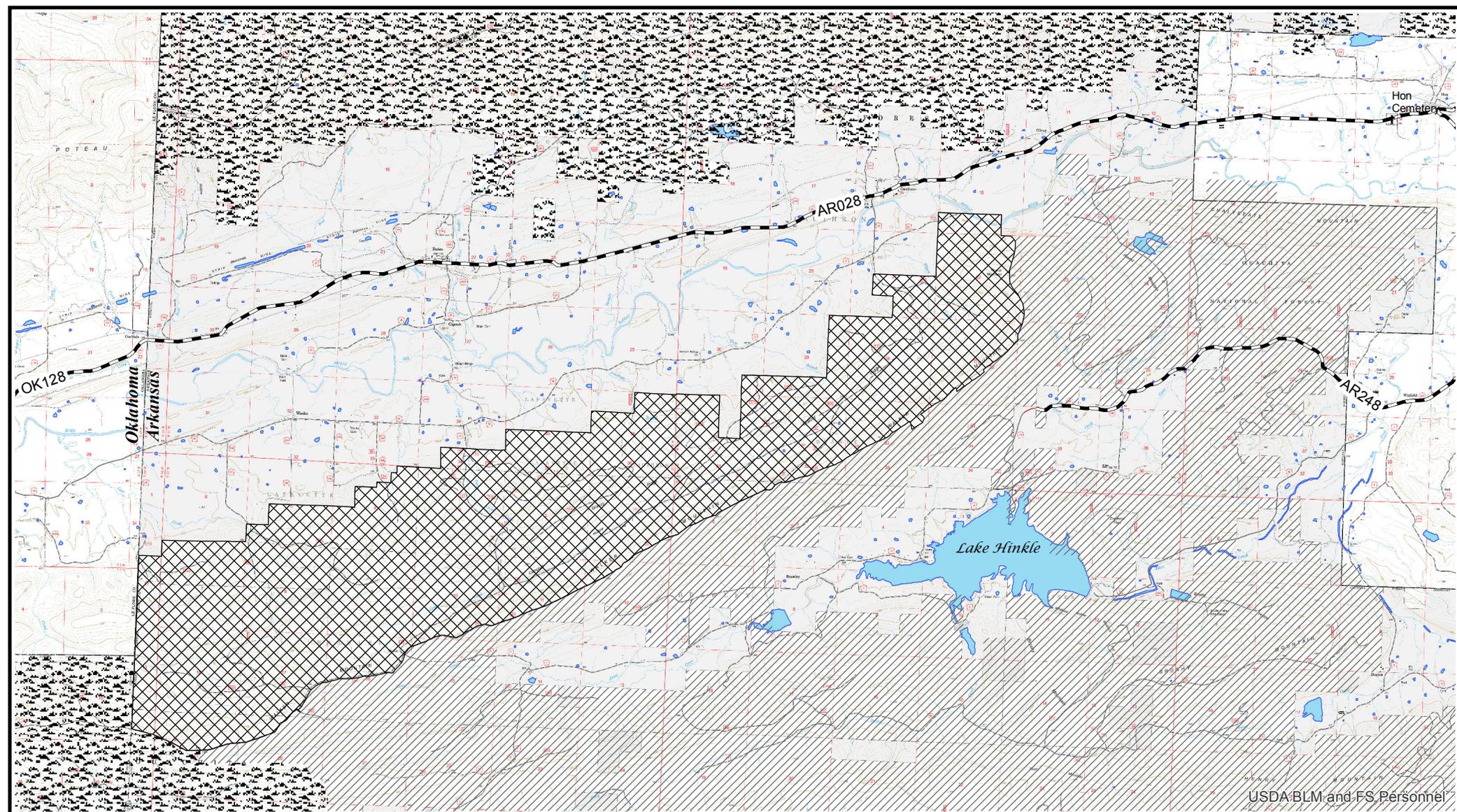
Electronic comments must be submitted in a common digital format to comments-southern-ouachita@fs.fed.us.

If you have questions about this project or would like more information, please contact Bill Pell at (501) 321-5320 or bpell@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,



NORMAN L. WAGONER
Forest Supervisor



USDA BLM and FS Personnel

Vicinity Map

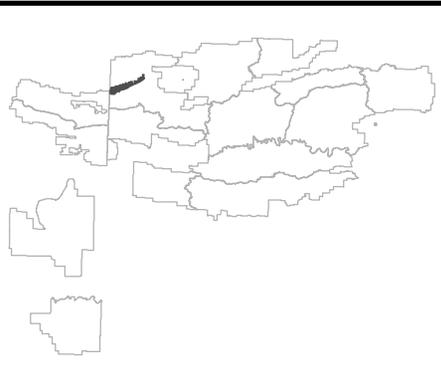
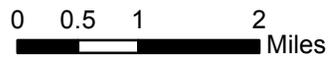


Image also available online at: www.fs.usda.gov/ouachita

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Legend

-  Transportation
-  National Forest Lands to Add to MA 22 - 12,802 acres
-  Current National Forest in MA 22
-  Other Management Areas on National Forest Lands

National Forest Land To Be Added To Management Area 22

Scott County, Arkansas

Poteau Ranger District
Scott County, Arkansas

U.S. Forest Service - R8
Ouachita National Forest

For more information, contact the Poteau Ranger District at 1541 Hwy. 248 West, Waldron, AR or phone (479) 637-4174

Map Creation Date - August 12, 2014
Map Revision Date -