

DECISION NOTICE
CONECUH SHOOTING RANGE
AND
FOREST PLAN AMENDMENT #3
MANAGEMENT PRESCRIPTION CHANGE
CONECUH NATIONAL FOREST
NATIONAL FORESTS IN ALABAMA
ESCAMBIA COUNTY, ALABAMA

DECISION

Based upon my review of the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Conecuh Shooting Range and the Forest Plan Amendment #3 for the management prescription change, I have decided to implement the Proposed Action, which establishes a shooting range on the Conecuh National Forest near the intersection of Escambia County Roads 11 and 4 at the location of an old borrow pit that is approximately 5 acres in size.

The Conecuh Shooting Range will provide shooting opportunities for rifles, handguns, and shotguns. Design and construction of the new facility will incorporate NRA guidelines for outdoor ranges and include the following features:

- 100 yard firing lane and earthen berm backstop with 10 individual rifle stations
- Combination 50/25 yard firing lane and earthen berm backstops with 10 individual stations for rimfire rifles and handguns
- Area separate from the firing lanes for shooting clays (shotgun only)
- Accessible sidewalk(s) down firing lanes to place/retrieve paper targets
- Fully accessible station(s) and parking
- Individual parking adjacent to each shooting station
- Covered concrete pad(s) for 20 stations, approximately 10 x 180 feet
- Pit toilet(s) similar to those provided at the Blue Lake Recreation Area and elsewhere on the Conecuh National Forest

Construction of the shooting range, including parking and access, will be accomplished in partnership with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries.

This action also includes removal of trees within the footprint of the shooting range site, parking areas, and access route as well as thinning trees as needed to improve visibility between the range site and main road. In addition, the surrounding area served by the main access through this site will be thinned at the same time to meet forest health and restoration objectives and red-cockaded woodpecker habitat needs. The total area subject to commercial timber harvest will be approximately 70 acres, including the existing borrow pit.

Site construction will involve hauling in additional soil and/or application of fertilizer to facilitate construction of berms and to improve soil conditions to establish vegetation

desired for the facility. Applications of lime, phosphate, or other material to adjust soil pH may occur to reduce the mobility of lead in the environment in compliance with an Environmental Stewardship Plan, which will be finalized in conjunction with design plans.

Elimination of public traffic on roads within the downrange safety fan will be required for public safety. Roads that will likely require closure will be those dead end spur roads east and north of FS 300, FS 311A, FS 311LL, and any other road within 3 miles down range of the firing lanes.

My decision to implement the Proposed Action includes amending the Forest Plan (Plan Amendment #3), designating the new Conecuh Shooting Range site as a Concentrated Recreation Zone prescription¹ and removing it from the Red-cockaded Woodpecker Management Areas prescription². The management prescription change will be defined by the maintenance area of the shooting range and associated parking area. We anticipate that this will be less than 10 acres and as such will be represented by a geographic point on the official Forest Plan maps rather than a polygon.

Decision Rationale

The EA for the Conecuh Shooting Range and Forest Plan Amendment #3 documents the environmental analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based. This Action has been developed in compliance with the Forest Plan, specifically Goal 22 and Objectives 22.1 and 22.2³ as described in the *Purpose of and Need for Action* (EA, pgs 2-3). This Action has also been developed in the spirit and intent of the Concentrated Recreation Zone prescription to provide recreational areas that enhance the quality of the recreational experience and serve as “gateways” to the wide diversity of recreation opportunities on the forest.

The EA addresses public concerns raised about this project as well as the environmental consequences of the action. It documents the environmental analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based.

I selected the Proposed Action alternative because it accomplishes the project objectives and meets the purpose and need for action.

Other Alternatives Considered in Detail

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered one other alternative in detail, the No Action Alternative.

No Action Alternative - The Forest Service would not take any action to establish a new shooting range on the Conecuh National Forest. With no designated site, the opportunity for recreational shooting would not exist on the Conecuh National Forest. Since a new shooting range would not be established under this alternative, no change in the Management Prescription for the proposed site would be needed; therefore, no Forest Plan amendment would be required.

¹ Concentrated Recreation Zone, prescription 7.D, pgs 3-29 to 3-31, Forest Plan.

² Red-cockaded Woodpecker Management Area, prescription 8.D.1, pgs 3-36 to 3-37, Forest Plan.

³ Goal 22 and Objectives 22.1 and 22.2, pgs 2-55 to 2-56, Forest Plan.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Documentation for the various public outreaches is on file at the Ranger Station in Andalusia, Alabama. The methods used are summarized below:

- ID Team members conducted personal conversations with nearby residents, local government officials, other agency representatives, known users of the former shooting range, and other potentially interested individuals and businesses specializing in hunting supplies.
- On January 28, 2012, a legal notice was published in the Andalusia Star-News requesting public comment on the Proposed Action. The formal public comment period ran for 30 days.
- Concurrent with the Request for Comments legal notice, packages were mailed via a combination of the Postal Service and electronic mail to known interested citizens and local officials.
- On February 3, 2012 a news release publicizing the comment period for the Proposed Action was issued to several local radio stations and newspapers.
- In early February 2012, a one page flyer describing the Proposed Action and comment period was shared with local sporting goods and convenience stores, including the sporting goods department in Wal-Mart.
- The one page flyer distributed in local stores was posted at the Highway 137 site of the former shooting range.

The public involvement campaign yielded more than a dozen official comments regarding the Proposed Action. The majority of comments received were supportive of the Proposed Action to establish a new range at the borrow pit site. A few were more neutral about a new range at the proposed site, but still desired a shooting range available closer to Andalusia, Alabama (either at another new location or the former Highway 137 site). Concerns and suggestions relative to safety were mentioned a few times and remained an important consideration to the ID Team throughout this process. None of the public comments included concerns or issues on the effects of the Proposed Action to natural resources.

Based on public comments and discussions among ID Team members and resource specialists, District Ranger Tim Mersmann selected the following issues to be addressed by the team and documented in this EA.

1. Public Safety
2. Public Travel Distance

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of the impacts (40 CFR 1508.27), and an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action.
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, (see EA pages 11-12).
3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, (see EA page 8-13).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. Because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the actions (see EA pages 8-13).
5. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (see EA pages 8-13).
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because this project is site-specific project (see EA pages 4-6).
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant (see EA pages 8-13).
8. The action will not have significant adverse effects on resources listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. This action will not cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic resources (See EA pages 11).
9. The action will not adversely impact any endangered or threatened species or its habitat (see EA pages 11).
10. The action will not violate Federal, State or local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment (See EA pages 8-13).
11. My conclusion 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 acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

NFMA Significance – The Forest Service is currently operating under the November 9, 2000 planning rule (see Federal Register, December 18, 2009). According to 36 CFR 219.35 and Appendix B to 219.35, the responsible official may elect to conduct the plan amendment process under the “1982 planning regulations” (those regulations in effect before November 9, 2000). I have elected to conduct this amendment following the 1982 planning regulations.

After reviewing the Environmental Assessment that includes Amendment #3 to the Forest Plan, I have determined that the decision to implement this amendment will not result in a significant change to the Forest Plan. This determination was made after consulting 16 U.S.C. 1604(f)(4), 36 CFR 219.10(f) (1982 regulations), Forest Service Manual 1926.51 – *Changes to the Land Management Plan that are Not Significant* and FSM 1926.52 – *Changes to the Land Management Plan that are Significant*. Based on these planning requirements, I have determined that:

- This amendment will not significantly alter the levels of goods and services projected by the Forest Plan; nor will it prevent the opportunity to achieve those outputs in later years.
- This amendment will not affect the entire land management plan, nor will it affect a large portion of the planning area during the planning period.

This decision is consistent with Forest Plan Goal 22 and Objectives 22.1 and 22.2⁴, in the spirit of the Concentrated Recreation Zone prescription⁵ to provide recreational areas that enhance the quality of the recreational experience and serve as “gateways” to the wide diversity of recreation opportunities on the forest.

ESA/NHPA – This decision meets the requirement of the Endangered Species Act and the National Historic Preservation Act (see EA – pages 11).

Executive Order 12898 (2/11/94) directs that federal action be considered for potentially disproportionate effects on minority or low-income communities. There is no evidence to believe that minority or low-income groups will be adversely or disproportionately affected by implementation of this action (see EA - pages 8-13).

I have determined that the land on which harvesting has been proposed is suitable for timber production as described in 16 U.S.C. 1604(k) (see EA - pages 8-13).

I have determined that the project is reasonable and feasible (see EA - pages 8-13).

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW (APPEAL) OPPORTUNITIES

Pursuant to 36 CFR 215, this decision is subject to appeal. Individuals and organizations who have submitted written or oral comments during the 30-day comment period may file an appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215.14. Written appeals, including any attachments, must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer within 45 days following the publication date of the legal notice of the decision in the newspaper of record (§215.7).

Appeals must be filed with the Regional Forester for the Southern Region at:

USDA Forest Service
Attn: Appeal Reviewing Officer
1720 Peachtree Road, NW, Suite 811N
Atlanta, GA 30309-9102

Appeals may also be faxed to (404) 347-5401 or mailed electronically in a common digital format to appeals-southern-regional-office@fs.fed.us. Hand-delivered appeals must be received within normal business hours of 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday – Friday, closed on federal holidays.

⁴ Goal 22 and Objectives 22.1 and 22.2, pgs 2-55 to 2-56, Forest Plan.

⁵ Concentrated Recreation Zone, prescription 7.D, pgs 3-29 to 3-31, Forest Plan.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

If no appeal is filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of the decision may begin on, but not before, the 5th business day following the close of the appeal-filing period (§215.15).

CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Debbie Russell, NEPA/GIS Coordinator, Conecuh National Forest, 24481 Alabama Highway 55, Andalusia, Alabama 36420 (telephone: 334-222-2555 ext 106 or email: dfoley@fs.fed.us).

/s/Dagmar Thurmond

April 17, 2012

for STEVEN M. LOHR
Forest Supervisor

Date

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**National Forests in Alabama
Revised Land and Resource Management Plan
Amendment #3**

**Management Prescription Change – Conecuh Shooting Range
April 17, 2012**

This amendment designates the new Conecuh Shooting Range site as a Concentrated Recreation Zone (7.D.) management prescription removing it from the Red-cockaded Woodpecker Management Area (8.D.1.) management prescription. The management prescription change is defined by the maintenance area of the shooting range and associated parking area. This area is less than 10 acres and as such is represented by a geographic point on the official forest plan maps, as amended, rather than a polygon (see attached map).

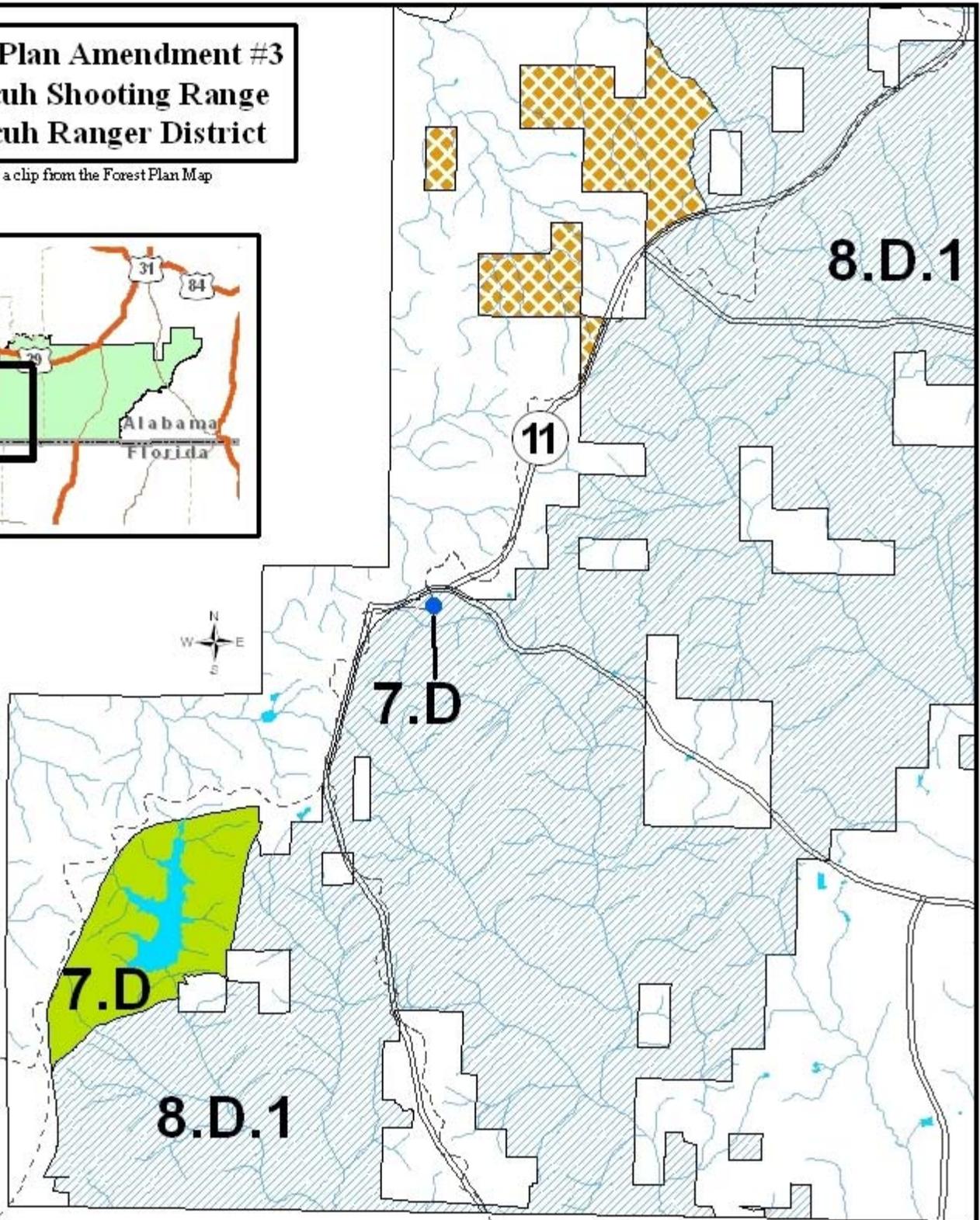
This amendment is a non-significant change to the NFsAL Revised Land and Resource Management Plan. The determination that this is a non-significant amendment is made in accordance with 16 U.S.C. 1604(f)(4), 36 CFR 219.10(f) (1982 regulations), Forest Service Manual 1926.51 – Changes to the Land Management Plan that are Not Significant and FSM 1926.52 – Changes to the Land Management Plan that are Significant. This plan amendment meets the criteria for a non-significant amendment because:

- This amendment will not significantly alter the levels of goods and services projected by the Forest Plan; nor will it prevent the opportunity to achieve those outputs in later years.
- This amendment will not affect the entire land management plan, nor will it affect a large portion of the planning area during the planning period.

The National Environmental Policy Act analysis for this change of direction has been documented in the Environmental Assessment for Conecuh Shooting Range and Forest Plan Amendment #3 Management Prescription Change. The Environmental Assessment is available for review at the Forest Supervisor's office and the Conecuh National Forest Ranger Station.

Forest Plan Amendment #3 Conecuh Shooting Range Conecuh Ranger District

This is a clip from the Forest Plan Map



Prescriptions

- 2.C - Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers
- pending suitability determination
- 4.C - Geologic Areas
- 4.D - Botanical/Zoological Areas
- 4.I - Natural, Non-Motorized Areas
- 5.A - Administrative Sites

- 7.D - Concentrated Recreation Zone
- 7.E.2 - Dispersed Recreation
- 8.B.1 - Woodlands, Savannas, Grasslands Habitats
- 8.D.1 - Red-cockaded Woodpecker HMA
- 9.D - Restoration of Longleaf Pine Forests
- 10.D - Grazing and Forest Emphasis
- Shooting Range - 7.D Prescription

- Watersheds
- Wildlife Management Area
- Roads
- Streams
- Water