

**Bankhead National Forest
Liaison Panel Meeting Summary
January 20, 2015
Alexander Park – Moulton Rec Center
Moulton, Alabama**

Forest Service Attendees:

Dave Casey, Bankhead District Ranger
Mike Cook, Bankhead ORA
Allison Cochran, Bankhead Wildlife Biologist
Carl Petrick, National Forests in Alabama, Forest Supervisor

Liaison Panel Members:

James Alexander
Randy Feltman
Mark Kolinski
Charles Borden
Russell Miller
Mike Henshaw
Anthony Hood
John Howell
Jud Easterwood

Public Attendees:

Lisa Gardner	Kim Waites	Henry McKinney
Patricia Alexander	Mike Bagwell	Emily Summers
Hollie Chambless	Gwena Sims	Steve Schwaiger
Luke Slaton	Pay Byington	Levi Brown
DD Martin	Lisa White	Jo Carter
Christina Conger	Janice Barrett	Francine & Bruce Hutchinson
Jay Murphry	Melissa & Roc Carey	David Bibb
Judy Burnett	Starlin Blankenship	Mary Lee Ratliff
Shannon Bank	Brenda Cummings	Elmo Robinson

Meeting Agenda

Welcome & Ground Rules

Dave Casey
District Ranger,
USFS, Bankhead

Ranger's Remarks

Dave Casey
District Ranger,
USFS, Bankhead

Forest Supervisor's Introduction

Carl Petrick
Forest Supervisor,
USFS, NFs in AL

**Meeting the Challenges of Recreation Impacts
Wild South & Sipsey Wilderness**

Mark Kolinski
AL Program Manager,
Wild South

Owl Creek Non-motorized Trail System Improvements

Mike Cook
ORA, USFS
Bankhead

Avian Response to Thinning & Burning in Bankhead

Emily Summers Holland
Graduate Student
Alabama A&M University

Questions and Comment Period

Dave Casey

Closeout

Dave Casey

Next meeting & agenda items
Other panel business items

Ranger Casey opened the meeting with a welcome and by summarizing the Liaison Panel's ground rules.

Ranger Casey shared several updates and project proposals with the group. A copy of his presentation is available. Prescribed burning is planned for about 20,000 acres, weather dependent, between now and spring. Updates on new projects include the Greater Collier Watershed Forest Health & Restoration Project's Decision is expected to be signed in early February; Houston Longleaf Restoration and the Area 1 Upland Hardwood Restoration Projects Environmental Analysis are beginning; and the Owl Creek Trail Project will be introduced at tonight's meeting and we are seeking input. Dave shared an update on the Houston Recreation Area. Forest Service still in process of analyzing how to best use limited resources. Please

continue to submit comments on services offered, partnerships and other ideas or input. Feral swine control program update includes a new Agreement with Wildlife Services on Bankhead is in the works. Timber Sale receipts will be used to fund a Wildlife Services temporary position on Bankhead to assist with feral swine program efforts.

Ranger Casey introduced a proposal/request from the City of Double Springs to annex portions of Bankhead National Forest in efforts to annex the Lakeshore Community into the City of Double Springs. A map was shared displaying tracts (north of Hwy 278) proposed for annexation. Double Springs needs a contiguous area in order to annex Lakeshore. This proposal brought several questions from the panel and public. There was a question about whether any National Forest land was currently in the city limits. There is no National Forest land currently in the city limits. There is no change to management expected. The City's goal of annexation is to address private landowners that would like to be annexed into the City. The property would continue to be National Forest land and city ordinances would not apply. This raised a question about effects on hunting opportunities. The city would pass an ordinance that no city regulations/ordinances would be applied on National Forest land within the city limits. There was a question about whether this project would appear on the Forest Service's Schedule of Proposed Actions and what NEPA will be completed? We don't know the answer to that question at this time. Double Springs Mayor Elmo Robinson was present at the meeting and explained that there are some developments in the area and the City is already providing water to the Lakeshore community. The City has plans to build a fire station at the airport to serve this community, which would save homeowner's money as the ISO goes down. This would reduce insurance premiums.

Ranger Casey shared a potential project to improve the Sipse River canoe launch area at Highway 33. The canoe launch is privately owned. There are Alabama Power Company funds available to improve the area. Forest Service is working to identify potential partners to work with the private landowners and the Alabama Power Company to improve this access point. There was a question about Alabama Power's interest in the launch. This project was identified in the FERC license for the Warrior River Project. The site provides access to Smith Lake. An idea was suggested to look into a conservation easement program for this site.

Ranger Casey & Forest Supervisor Carl Petrick recognized Allison Cochran, District Wildlife Biologist, for receiving a National Botany Award for her partnership work with stewardship of rare plants and rare communities.

Ranger Casey introduced and welcomed the new Forest Supervisor for the National Forests in Alabama.

Forest Supervisor Carl Petrick shared his background and goals for the National Forests in Alabama. Supervisor Petrick has been managing natural resources for over 30 years. He graduated with a Wildlife Science degree from Auburn University in 1985 and then entered the police academy. He worked with the military, managing natural resources before joining the

Forest Service. He worked for 12 years as a staff officer with the National Forests in Florida managing natural resources. Carl has three sons.

The Forest Supervisor's vision for National Forests is sustaining good management through time, regardless of staff or current management schemes. He discussed a process for Ecological Condition Modeling that he would like to implement in Alabama. Carl has worked with this modeling in Florida and will initiate it in Alabama. Ecological Condition Modeling looks at current natural communities and evaluates current conditions versus desired future conditions on a landscape scale. The modeling includes an evaluation of quality of conditions, in tiers. For example, tier 1 is a high quality reference community and tier 5 is in the poorest condition or off-site vegetation. This will allow for a balance of protection and maintenance of Tier 1 sites and allow for strategizing restoration of degraded sites. The process will allow for increased efficiencies over time. The Ecological Condition Modeling is a mid-level planning tool. The Forest Service has the Forest Plan at the Program Level or Scale and Environmental Assessments at the Project Level or Scale. This Modeling is intermediate between those ends. Carl's goal is to work with Alabama Natural Heritage Program in concert with the Florida Natural Heritage Program to begin this process in Alabama on the Conecuh National Forest. The goal is to expand it throughout the state with the Alabama Natural Heritage Program. It will be a sort of "State of the Union" for the National Forests in Alabama. This process will also be a great communication tool internally and externally. It also helps prioritize work, rather than having random acts of conservation on the ground.

Questions from panel members and the public

Mike Henshaw asked about Carl's experience with a group like the Liaison Panel and priority of a group like this going forward?

In Florida, Carl worked closely with individual organizations on a one-on-one basis, not in a group such as the Bankhead Liaison Panel. Rangers on individual Districts worked the public and partners like this, but at the Supervisor's Office level, he wasn't so involved with that.

Charles Borden shared his concern about the consequences of urbanization and population growth and the private inholdings on Bankhead National Forest. He made a recommendation to consolidate/purchase private lands and make that a priority for the Forest Service and National Forests.

Carl is not sure what the Regional Office's priorities are for acquisition. Carl agrees that it should be a priority to acquire lands to consolidate landownership. The State & Private branch of the Forest Service has a Keeping Forests Initiative that addresses land acquisition. Carl shared that there is a new Regional Forester in the southern region of the Forest Service, Tony Tooke. Tony is from Alabama and has worked throughout the southern region, including on the National Forests in Alabama. There are great directors of the Biological & Physical Resources Staff, Planning and Natural Resources in the southern region office – top notch leadership. Carl will visit with Tony and his staff to find out more about the prioritization of making acquisitions. On Bankhead, we have generally had land exchanges rather than

acquisitions. We have gotten rid of isolated tracts in exchange for private inholdings in efforts to consolidate ownership.

Lisa Gardner, Manager and Coordinator for the Center for Forest Ecosystem Assessment at Alabama A&M University announced a meeting on March 18. Alabama A&M will hold a meeting to provide a research update for the Forest Service on A&M's on-going research projects in North Alabama. Lisa extended an invitation to the Liaison Panel to attend the meeting.

Mark Kolinski, Wild South, attended the National Wilderness Conference and Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Mark presented a program at that conference entitled Meeting the Challenges of Recreation Impacts – Wild South and the Sipsey Wilderness. Mark shared that presentation with the panel. Mark described the challenges of Wilderness Management, the dualities of Wilderness recreation, the threats to Wilderness and the impacts to Wilderness and mitigations of those impacts. Mark described the Wild South partnership with the Forest Service in Wilderness Areas. The partnership includes volunteer stewardship activities like trail restoration, non-native invasive plant surveys and control, and the Wilderness Rangers Program. This partnership aids the Forest Service in meeting some of the challenges of recreation impacts in Wilderness areas. A copy of the presentation is available upon request.

Mike Cook, Other Resources Assistant, gave several updates and introduced a new project. On the President's Day Holiday, there will be Free Day Use at some locations on the Bankhead. Information should be available on our website. A 50K run will be held on the Owl Creek non-motorized trail system. Mike gave an update on the Owl Creek trail maintenance contract. The Key Mill Loop is complete and will be open this weekend for riding. The Brushy Loop from the bridge to the Brushy Creek Road to the Shelton Road is currently closed. They should be open in another week. Then we will have a pause with the contract while we are awaiting our next round of funds for the contract. During that time, all loops will be open.

Mike introduced a new project proposal for the Owl Creek trail system. The Owl Creek non-motorized system was planned about 20 years ago through a Master Trails Environmental Assessment. Owl Creek was designated as non-motorized, open to hiking, biking and horseback riding. It included three loops with compatible uses. The Owl Creek system has had high horse use over the years. Annual maintenance has been lacking. Combining those things with rainfall, many areas are highly eroded. An assessment was conducted a few years ago, developing several ideas for the Owl Creek system, but no decisions were made. An example from the assessment is the 2 new bridges that have been installed and completed. The assessment identified heavy maintenance needs and potential re-routes and additions. But no environmental analysis has occurred and input is needed. Currently, the Bankhead and some partners have identified about 8-10 areas to propose for an environmental assessment and decision to improve trail riding. These proposed areas offer different riding opportunities and they can be maintained with equipment that the Forest Service and our partners have. The

locations were identified to reduce impacts and erosion on the system. The current proposal includes:

Designate New Trail - Four gated roads are identified to add riding opportunities. Currently you cannot ride a horse on a road unless it is open to vehicles or if it is designated as a horse trail. This proposal would designate four gated roads as a non-motorized trail. These are not dead end areas. Each of them touches a trail on both ends. This will add about four miles of riding opportunity.

New Trail Construction – Construct 2 ¼ miles of new trail. The areas proposed are well-sited for good maintenance, on good grade and not in boggy areas. There are 5 pieces of new trail for consideration for new trail construction.

Trail Closure – Close ½ mile of current trail that is unsafe or severely eroded and difficult to maintain.

Construct a Day Use Trailhead – Open a day use trailhead off of the Brushy Creek Road. The trailhead will relieve some pressure from the Owl Creek Day Use and result in less impact to the Key Mill Loop.

Mike shared a map of the proposal. The public scoping period begins on Saturday and includes information on how to comment. The District prefers written comments.

Questions and Comments

The new routes will enhance the area for children and people that do not want very long rides. This will reduce the amount of illegal short cuts on the system.

The Day Use Trailhead on the Brushy Creek Road will be at a post-gated road that accesses a Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area Wildlife Opening. It will be small, enough space to accommodate 3 or 4 horse trailers.

The proposal is expected to result in an Environmental Assessment and Decision Notice.

Trail construction may be conducted in-house by the Bankhead staff and partners.

A major goal of the project is to not increase maintenance needs and hopefully reduce it.

Emily Summers Holland, graduate student at Alabama A&M University shared a presentation about some of her bird research on Bankhead National Forest. The presentation was entitled Avian Response to Thinning and Burning Prescriptions on the Bankhead National Forest, AL. Partner's in Flight has highlighted declines in migrant songbirds including early successional species. This project looks at bird response 6-7 years following intermediate forest disturbance. It is part of a long-term larger research project on Bankhead. Emily's study looked at bird response to varying degrees of first thinnings and varying frequencies of prescribed burns in loblolly pine stands. The objectives of the study include; (1) examining microhabitat

characteristics of stands after disturbance regimes; (2) noting differences in bird communities following disturbance; (3) describing species and guild responses; and (4) making associations between species and guild abundance with various microhabitat characteristics through ordination techniques. The project included avian community sampling using line transect and distance sampling methods and microhabitat sampling including habitat (litter, bare ground, CWD, herbaceous and woody cover) and vertical forest layers (ground cover, understory, midstory and overstory). Emily observed that bird communities change temporally in response to disturbance and succession. Habitat is created for early successional species facing declines. And, that black-and-white warbler and Acadian flycatcher show some negative response and those populations should be monitored. Conclusions include that habitat is created for early successional species, but also mature forest birds, generalists and most interior species are supported in managed forests and show neutral response to treatment.

Ranger Casey opened up the floor for question and comment period.

Pat Byington shared comments on the land acquisition for inholdings that was brought up at the beginning of the meeting. He suggested involvement with the Forever Wild program. The Forever Wild Board meets on the first Thursday in February in Montgomery. The program has money available for purchasing inholdings. Priorities include inholdings within WMAs and providing recreational access, like hunting and fishing. These allow for contiguous management. Additionally, there are opportunities through the Land and Water Conservation Fund for funds for land acquisition.

Randy Feltman objects to acquisition. He feels that currently he has to hunt the edge of the National Forest because that is where the wildlife and food are. Why buy more land that you cannot manage? Jud Easterwood responded that Forever Wild is a state partnership and management may be different than National Forest management. Additionally, habitat quality is not always the answer for deer, there may be access/pressure issues or other effects unrelated to habitat. There was discussion on the effects of feral swine on deer. And discussion on goals of management between WMAs, Forever Wild and National Forest lands. While some want to see more disturbance in Zone A of the Black Warrior, there are multiple land management goals in the Area. A primary goal is promoting diversity of all species. It was suggested that at a future meeting, Matt Brock may be able to share a presentation showing results of implementing the Quality Deer Management Program on the Black Warrior, differences in hunting participation and hunter success, and differences in management between the Zones on Black Warrior WMA. There is a deer and coyote study taking place in Alabama and Georgia examining the effects of coyote predation on fawns and deer populations, as well as one on antlerless harvest.

Francine Hutchinson introduced herself. She and a group of individuals are interested in starting a group like the Liaison Panel on the Talladega National Forest. She came to learn about the liaison panel and meet the new Forest Supervisor.

*Copies of power point presentations that were shared at the meeting are available by contacting Allison Cochran at the Bankhead office.