



FINAL DECISION NOTICE AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

PLEASANT HILL WILDLIFE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT

U.S. FOREST SERVICE

PLEASANT HILL RANGER DISTRICT

OZARK-ST. FRANCIS NATIONAL FORESTS

JOHNSON, FRANKLIN, MADISON AND NEWTON COUNTIES, AR

DECISION

Based upon my review of the Pleasant Hill Wildlife Habitat Improvement Environmental Assessment (EA), I have decided to implement Alternative 2, which includes the following actions:

Existing Wildlife Opening Maintenance:

Existing wildlife openings will be maintained district-wide on a rotational basis. This proposal considers the long term maintenance of 252 wildlife openings. Mowing will occur on a 1-2 year schedule. Disking, seeding native or non-invasive cool season forage plants, accompanied by application of fertilizer and lime will occur on a 2-3 year schedule. Application of approved herbicides such as glyphosate, imazapic, imazapyr, triclopyr, or hexazinone will occur on a 2-3 year schedule if needed to reduce encroachment of woody species on a maximum of 250 acres annually. These openings will disperse concentrations of animal species over a broader area and will meet goals outlined in the Ozark – St. Francis National Forests RLRMP. Many animals need these forest openings to fulfill all or some of their habitat requirements during their life cycle. The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, local volunteers, the National Wild Turkey Federation and contractors will participate with the USDA Forest Service in wildlife opening maintenance.

Gate Installation:

Gates will be installed on identified wildlife opening access roads. Roads designated as open to the public will not be closed. Roads which provide access to private developments will not be closed. Gates at wildlife openings will improve wildlife habitat by reducing disturbance to wildlife from vehicles and provide better recreational experiences to Forest users by limiting areas to walk-in hunting/wildlife viewing only. Approximately 25 gates may be constructed under this proposal.

Wildlife Opening Construction:

Three new wildlife openings are proposed in locations previously impacted by surface disturbance (see map). These three areas are previously cleared land, but have some encroachment of brush and small trees. Locations of these openings are Yarbrough Gap – east side of Highway 103 (decommissioned gas well pad and pipeline), Catalpa – northwest of Catalpa community on FDR 94335G (log landing), and Little Mulberry – south of Highway 215 on FDR 94404A (old field). Wildlife openings will be constructed with either use of a masticator and/or pushing stumps and debris with a dozer. Establishment of desired species may occur using disking, liming, seeding and fertilization or existing native herbaceous vegetation will suffice for wildlife habitat. Once constructed, these openings will be maintained as specified in “Existing Wildlife Opening

Maintenance” (above).

Woodland Restoration:

This activity will occur in two geographic areas of the Pleasant Hill Ranger District on approximately 431 acres (Wolf Pen Glade and Barron). Woodland restoration is also known as wildlife stand improvement (WSI) thinning. This project will occur incrementally over several years with approximately 100-300 acres occurring annually. This project will occur through the use of chainsaw felling, mechanized equipment such as a tree shear or masticator, and/or girdling and herbicide application. Foliar application of herbicide to treat stems less than 4 feet in height may also be used. If a commercial market becomes available for low quality hardwood, these areas may be commercially harvested. Currently, the areas designated for woodland restoration are characterized as low quality hardwood on dry sites that were historically maintained as open woodland by large fires. These areas contain approximately 70-90 overstory (large) trees per acre. Thinning will reduce the number of trees per acre to approximately 25-50 trees per acre. Woodland restoration thinning will result in an average basal area of approximately 30-50 square feet per acre in treated stands. Cut trees will be left in place on site, or will be utilized as fire wood, unless they are utilized as commercial forest products. On appropriate sites, shortleaf pine planting may occur following thinning and prescribed fire. Shortleaf pine may be planted at the rate of 20-40 seedlings per acre to increase this species where it is lacking. Woodland restoration will allow more sunlight to reach the forest floor (thereby increasing herbaceous species diversity) and promote more mast (nut & fruit) production from the remaining trees. All forest-wide standards and herbicide labels/precautions will be followed in the use of herbicide.

Existing Woodland Restoration Area Maintenance:

The Pleasant Hill Ranger District proposes to utilize foliar herbicide application and or cut surface herbicide application to improve and maintain woodland conditions. This will occur within designated subunits within the Barron, Morgan Mountain, Indian Creek, Clear Creek, Sarah Hollow, Batson, Lynn Hollow, and Arbaugh Woodland Prescribed Burn Units. These subunits have been treated with non-commercial thinning previously to reduce canopy coverage and improve understory herbaceous species abundance and diversity. Prescribed fire is the preferred method of reducing understory hardwood and cedar density in these areas. Herbicide application will be utilized when prescribed fire is not possible due to prescription/smoke issues, or when hardwood saplings are not top killed by prescribed fires. On appropriate sites, shortleaf pine planting may occur following thinning and prescribed fire. Shortleaf pine may be planted at the rate of 20-40 seedlings per acre to increase this species where it is lacking.

Twelve areas comprising approximately 2,667 acres may be treated with herbicide to maintain and improve woodland condition. These areas may receive herbicide treatment if prescribed fire is not effective in reducing understory woody species. It is anticipated that herbicide use in these areas will range from 50-500 acres annually. Use of herbicide will benefit herbaceous understory diversity and abundance by reducing competition and shading by woody species. This treatment will benefit a variety of game and non-game species which require open woodland habitat with diverse understory vegetation for all or a portion of their habitat needs. Approved herbicides such as glyphosate, imazapyr, or triclopyr will be used. All forest-wide standards and herbicide labels/precautions will be followed in the use of herbicide.

Non-native Invasive Species (NNIS - plants):

NNIS (plants) abatement is proposed throughout the Pleasant Hill Ranger District with the use of approved herbicides such as glyphosate, imazapic, imazapyr, triclopyr, or hexazinone. This will entail the treatment of undesirable non-native plants such as tall fescue, kudzu, sericea lespedeza, Japanese stiltgrass, Johnsongrass, tree of heaven, European privet and multiflora rose. Other NNIS plants which may be identified in the future could be treated in a similar manner. NNIS abatement could occur on a maximum of 600 acres annually district-wide. Following herbicide application, planting of native vegetation may occur if required. Abatement of NNIS will improve wildlife habitat for several mammal, bird and reptile species by reducing displacement of native vegetation by NNIS. Herbicide treatments will follow product label instructions regulating use, including application methods to minimize drift and contamination to non-target species.

Non-native Invasive Species (NNIS-feral hogs):

NNIS (feral hog) abatement is proposed throughout the Pleasant Hill Ranger District utilizing trapping and shooting. Feral hogs will be hunted only by approved volunteers governed by specific check-in, method and reporting procedures set forth by the Pleasant Hill Ranger District. Hunting with dogs is prohibited during Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) established deer, bear and turkey firearms seasons.

Maintenance of Restored Native Warm Season Grass Fields

Approximately 289 acres of previously restored native warm season grass fields on the Pleasant Hill Ranger District will be maintained with prescribed fire, herbicide application and haying. Maintenance will occur in the Woolsey, Yale, Mayo, Baker and Arbaugh fields. Approximately 145 acres will be burned annually to reduce woody species encroachment in these fields and improve warm season grasses. A maximum of 150 acres annually will be treated with approved herbicides to reduce woody species encroachment and NNIS (Johnsongrass, sericea lespedeza, etc.). Up to 289 acres may be hayed annually under special use permit or a stewardship agreement. Haying will also reduce woody species encroachment in the fields. Should the demand arise, these fields may be harvested for seed either by Forest Service personnel, or under special use permit or a stewardship agreement. All forest-wide standards and herbicide labels/precautions will be followed in the use of herbicide.

Restoration of Warm Season Grass in Acquired Fields

Approximately 32 acres of acquired fields on the former Poole property will be converted from fescue and Bermuda grass and restored to native warm season species, or portions may be converted to cool season forage wildlife openings. A mix of cool season forage and native warm season grasses and forbs is desired for this area, and separate fields will facilitate this. For conversion/restoration, prescribed fire followed by herbicide application will be used to reduce fescue and Bermuda grasses. Following this, fields will be planted with desired warm season species (such as big blue stem, little blue stem, Indian grass, switchgrass and forbs) and desired cool season species (such as Virginia wildrye, clover, winter wheat and annual rye grass). Seeding will be accomplished with a no-till drill, or through disking, broadcast seeding and rolling. Following establishment of warm season grasses, these fields will be maintained under the same guidelines as described for previously restored native warm season grass fields. The cool season forage portions of these fields will be maintained under the same guidelines as described for wildlife opening maintenance. All forest-wide standards and herbicide

labels/precautions will be followed in the use of herbicide.

Pond & Lake Management

Structures to improve fish cover, spawning habitat and recreational fishing will be introduced into District ponds and Horsehead Lake. Structures could include gravel, brush piles and pvc. Up to 40 structures will be constructed at District ponds/lakes annually. Sodium bentonite will be used at the District discretion to seal ponds which are losing water through seepage. Fertilization of approximately 123 acres of District ponds and Horsehead Lake will occur annually. Fertilization will increase algae bloom and productivity of these recreational fishing areas. Liming of Horsehead Lake (98 ac.) will occur annually. Liming improves water pH and the effectiveness of fertilization. Control of dense aquatic vegetation such as watershield will improve ponds managed for recreational fishing. Approved herbicides with no restrictions upon swimming or fish consumption will be utilized. Ponds with dense aquatic vegetation will be treated with herbicide only after efforts to use biological control methods have failed (grass carp). This activity will occur on a maximum of 15 pond acres annually. Twenty-eight ponds exist on the Pleasant Hill Ranger District which may receive these treatments. All forest-wide standards and herbicide labels/precautions will be followed in the use of herbicide. Approximately 30 acres of ponds may be stocked annually with forage fish to improve growth of sport fish. Approximately 30 acres of ponds may be stocked with sport fish if fish populations in ponds are depleted by fishing or other sources of mortality.

Access Improvement to Acquired Poole Tract:

With potential future removal or modification of the low-water, concrete bridge crossing the Mulberry River on the acquired Poole property, the Forest Service will require alternate access into this tract of land for facilitation of management. Access to this tract will be from the south side of the Mulberry River utilizing FDR 4432, FDR 94674A, and the termination of Johnson County Road 5241 on the Poole Tract. Approximately 3.2 miles of FDR 4432 and 0.8 miles of FDR 94674A will be maintained under normal Forest Service maintenance schedules to access this acquired tract. Approximately 0.4 miles of new road (using existing road templates where possible), will be constructed from the terminus of FDR 94674A into the Poole Tract. Road construction will occur in Township 12 North, Range 24 West, Section 29 NWNW and Section 20 SWSW. This section of road will be constructed to facilitate administrative access with high clearance vehicles and equipment necessary for maintenance of the Poole Tract fields. Approximately 0.4 miles of an existing section of 94674A will be decommissioned – where this existing section is located along a stream course. New road access will be constructed with drainage structures such as waterbars and culverts (as needed) to eliminate sedimentation in the watershed through road erosion. Vehicle access to the Poole Tract will be limited to administrative access only, through construction of a gate on FDR 94674A or FDR 4432 in Township 12 North, Range 24 West, Section 29 NENW, NWNE, or NENE.

Prescribed Burning:

The Pleasant Hill Ranger District proposes the use of management ignited prescribed fire on approximately 108,870 acres in 14 areas district-wide. The U.S. Forest Service and the Arkansas Forestry Commission will solicit cooperation with private landowners through the use of Stevens (State) and Wyden (Federal) agreements, which allow the agencies to carry out prescribed fire

treatments on private lands surrounded by or adjacent to public lands under federal management. If private land owners do not wish to participate in prescribed fire treatments, their lands will be excluded from the project.

The primary goals of the prescribed component of this project is to reduce fuel accumulation in order to better protect National Forest and adjacent private lands from wildfire, and to reintroduce fire as a disturbance factor into fire adapted ecosystems. Implementation of prescribed fire will improve Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) from FRCC 3 to FRCC 2 or 1. Prescribed fire also promotes oak regeneration, maintains pine/hardwood stands in open conditions, increases herbaceous understory species density and diversity, maintains/restores glades, improves habitat conditions for fire-dependent special-status plants, increases soft-mast production, reduces potentially hazardous accumulations of fuels on the forest floor, and improves wildlife habitat conditions.

Individual burn units will be treated with prescribed fire on an approximate 3-6 year rotation. Not all burn units will be burned in the same year, but will be burned incrementally over a multiple-year period.

Smoke emission modeling has been completed as part of the project analysis (see Air Quality Section). All prescribed burning will be conducted in compliance with Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) voluntary smoke management guidelines.

Silvicultural Practices on Acquired Lands (Poole Tract)

The recently acquired Poole Tract comprises approximately 180 acres. In addition to fields, this tract contains approximately 150 acres of hardwood and pine forest vegetation. There have been varying levels of past timber harvest on this tract by the previous landowner.

Hardwood Release: If desired species have adequately replenished harvested stands by natural means, release measures may be implemented using handtools/herbicide, if necessary, to reduce competing vegetation. If desired species have failed to adequately establish new stands, planting & release of oak species may be required.

Hardwood Pre-commercial Thinning (PCT): This treatment may be applied in stands that are not commercially mature. The purpose of PCT is to cut small, unmerchantable trees competing with desired hardwood species. Herbicide and/or handtools will be used to accomplish this. This treatment allows for the selection of the trees with the best form to remain and free them of competition. Prescribed burning may follow this treatment to further control unwanted competitors of oak.

Hardwood Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) - Midstory Treatment: This treatment may be applied to stands comprised of mostly immature sawtimber that have a component of mature trees. These stands often have a dense midstory and understory of undesirable species. Removal of these undesirable species will allow oak and other desirable species currently in and underneath the midstory to be released and become competitive. Herbicide and/or handtools will be used to accomplish this. The success of this treatment will allow a regeneration harvest to be considered next entry. Prescribed burning may follow this treatment to further control unwanted competitors of oak.

Pine Release: If desired species have adequately replenished harvested stands by natural means, release measures may be implemented using handtools/herbicide to reduce competing vegetation. If desired species have failed to adequately establish new stands, planting & release of shortleaf pine will be required.

Pine Pre-commercial Thinning (PCT): This treatment may be applied in stands that are not commercially mature. The purpose of PCT will be to cut small, unmerchantable trees that are competing with desired shortleaf pine. Herbicide and/or handtools will be used to accomplish this. This treatment will allow for the selection of the trees with the best form to remain and to free them of competition. Prescribed burning may follow this treatment to further control hardwood species.

Pine TSI- Midstory Treatment: This treatment will be applied to previously harvested stands which have not accumulated any pine regeneration to be adequately stocked. Maturing pine stands need an adequate component of pine seedlings to be prepared for future regeneration harvest. Hardwood competition will be controlled by handtool/herbicide treatments and the seed bed prepared by Rx burning for natural seedfall.

Pine Site Preparation, Pine Planting, and Release: This treatment will be applied to stands which were harvested previously to start a new generation of trees. If natural regeneration methods have not been able to fully restock these sites, this treatment will be applied. Competing hardwood brush and saplings will be reduced, allowing pine seedlings to become established. Treatments in the form of handtool/herbicide/mechanical means will be employed in order to prepare these areas for seedfall. Where pine seedlings do occur, release treatments can be employed to reduce hardwood competition using handtools and/or herbicides. Finally, where pine regeneration has not become established, planting by hand will occur.

Removal of Structures on Acquired Lands (Poole Tract)

The Poole Tract acquisition contains old structures including a house, barn, and additional outbuildings. Some of these structures present a safety hazard on public lands and are a liability to the Forest Service due to their condition and remote location. Structures deemed unsafe or unneeded will be dismantled. However, before buildings can be dismantled the Forest Service Zone Archaeologist is required to complete structural documentation forms on all structures older than 50 years, and submit these to the State Historic Preservation Office for concurrence.

**Table 1. Alternative 2 – Summary of Projects
(Wildlife Openings, Native Warm Season Grass Fields, Pond Maintenance & NNIS)**

Activity	Approx. #	Scheduling	Location
Wildlife Openings			
Wildlife Opening Maintenance (mowing)	250 acres	annually	Various – Districtwide (see map)
Wildlife Opening Maintenance (disk/seed/fertilize/lime)	250 acres	annually	Various – Districtwide (see map)
Wildlife Opening Maintenance (herbicide application)	250 acres	annually	Various – Districtwide (see map)
Gate Installation at Wildlife Openings	25 gates	-	Various – Districtwide (see map)
Wildlife Opening Construction	10 acres	2015-2017	3 locations (see map)
Native Warm Season Grass (NWSG)			
Restoration of NWSG	32 acres	2015-2016	Poole Tract
Maintenance of NWSG Fields (RX fire)	145 acres	annually	Woolsey, Yale, Mayo, Baker, Arbaugh & Poole Tracts
Maintenance of NWSG Fields (Herbicide)	150 acres	annually	Woolsey, Yale, Mayo, Baker, Arbaugh & Poole Tracts
Maintenance of NWSG Fields (Haying)	289 acres	annually	Woolsey, Yale, Mayo, Baker, Arbaugh & Poole Tracts
Roadwork			
Access Improvement for NWSG Restoration & Maintenance	0.4 miles	2015-2016	Poole Tract
Road Decommissioning	0.4 miles	2015-2016	Poole Tract
Pond Maintenance			
Pond Management (herbicide)	15 acres	annually	Dry Spadra (Harmony Quad)
Pond/Lake Management (structures)	40	annually	McConnell
Pond/Lake Management (fertilization)	123 acres	annually	Box Springs
Pond/Lake Management (liming)	98 acres	annually	Batson
Pond/Lake Management (stocking)	30 acres	annually	Elkins
			North Batson (Hunt Quad)
			Horsehead Lake
			Gillian (Ludwig Quad)
			Weimar
			Phillips Loop
			Pine Hill
			Darby Flat
			Cazort
			Mikles Road #2
			White Road #1 (Hagarville Quad)
			White Road #2
			Chalybeate
			Woods Mountain
			Seven Devils
			Barnes (Cass Quad)
			Schoolhouse (Oark Quad)
			Black Road
			Patterson
			Bear Branch
			Rosetta (Rosetta Quad)

			Bee Ridge #1 Bee Ridge #2
Pond Maintenance			
Pond Management (herbicide)	15 acres	annually	Gene #1 (Yale Quad)
Pond/Lake Management (structures)	40	annually	Gene #2
Pond/Lake Management (fertilization)	123 acres	annually	Mayo Ponds
Pond/Lake Management (liming)	98 acres	annually	
Pond/Lake Management (stocking)	30 acres	annually	Mikles Road #1 (Ozone Quad)
Non Native Invasive Species (NNIS)			
NNIS Herbicide Application	600 acres	annually	Various – Districtwide as occurrences are identified*
NNIS Feral Hog Hunting/Trapping	districtwide	annually	Various – Districtwide as occurrences are identified*

***NNIS abatement – requires use of Implementation Checklist for Invasive Plant Control**

Table 2. Alternative 2 – Summary of Projects (Woodland Restoration Thinning)

Woodland Restoration Project Area Name (thinning)	Within this Burn Unit (on map)	Compt./Stand	FT/CC	Approximate Acres	7.5 Minute Quad.
Wolf Pen Glade	Wolf Pen Glade	453/3	5311	28	Yale & Oark
		453/6	5311	61	
		453/16	5311	82	
		453/20	5305	24	
		453/29	5311	46	
Subtotal				241 acres	
Barron	Barron	415/18	5307	80	Cass
		415/23	5307	32	
		415/25	5307	33	
		418/34	5307	45	
Subtotal				190 acres	
TOTALS		9 stands		431 acres	

Table 3. Alternative 2 – Summary of Projects (Woodland Restoration Maintenance)

Woodland Restoration Project Area Name (maintenance)	Within this Burn Unit (on map)	Compt./Stand	FT/CC	Approximate Acres	7.5 Minute Quad.
Morgan Mountain	Morgan Mountain	447/12	5307	23	Cass
		447/16	5307	21	
		669/9	5307	35	
Subtotal				79	
Arbaugh Glade	Lynn Hollow	303/15	5307	84	Boston
		304/6	5307	57	
Subtotal				141	
Arbaugh Fields/Woodland	Arbaugh Woodland	458/15	5311	32	Oark
		458/17	5311	52	
Subtotal				84	
Cashew Stewardship – Pink Twist & Low Bridge Roads	Clear Creek	408/12	5307	22	Yale
		408/33	5307	90	

		408/19	5307	74	
Subtotal				186	
Cashew Stewardship – Beech Grove Road	Indian Creek	449/15	5407	118	Yale
		449/12	5307	10	
		465/7 & 5 partial	5311	135	
		449/10 partial	5307	48	
		668/8	5307	128	
Subtotal				439	
Cashew Stewardship – Barron/Redding Road	Barron	417/10	5307	64	Cass
		417/2	5307	189	
		417/13	5307	59	
Subtotal				312	
Cashew Stewardship – Morgan Mtn.	Morgan Mountain	445/3 & 24	5307	34	Cass
		445/8	5307	59	
Subtotal				93	
Big Flat Stewardship – Big Flat	Clear Creek	407/12,32 & 11 partial	5307	114	Yale
		663/1	5307	31	
		663/12,13 & 8 partial	5307	214	
		663/8	5307	44	
		663/5	5307	62	
		407/15	5307	50	
		407/19	5307	15	
Subtotal				530	
Big Flat Stewardship – Carr Road	Indian Creek	451/2,3 & 4	5307	228	Yale
Subtotal				228	
Big Flat Stewardship – Beech Grove Road	Indian Creek	448/19	5307	148	Yale
		465/6	5307	122	
		465/10	5307	72	
		465/11	5307	30	
Subtotal				372	
Big Flat Stewardship – Batson/Horsehead	Batson	395/24	5307	34	Hunt
		396/2	5307	24	
Subtotal				58	
Big Flat East	Sarah Hollow	404/1	5311	88	Yale
		405/13	5311	44	
		402/19	5311	13	
Subtotal				145	
TOTALS		45 Stands		2,667 acres	

Table 4. Alternative 2 – Summary of Projects (Prescribed Fire)

Project Area	Approximate Acres	Scheduling	7.5 Minute Quad.
Arbaugh Fields/Woodland	240 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Oark
	0 private*		
Subtotal	240 acres		
Barron – Redding Road	2,860 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Cass
	5 private*		
Subtotal	2,865 acres		
Batson – Horsehead/Sinclair Hollow	7,274 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Hunt & Harmony
	2,831 private*		
Subtotal	10,105 acres		
Catalpa	7,871 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Oark & Ozone
	1,226 private*		
Subtotal	9,097 acres		
Chinquapin	2,043 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Harmony & Hunt
	2,880 private*		
Subtotal	4,923 acres		
Clear Creek	7,177 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Yale
	2,934 private*		
Subtotal	10,111 acres		
Indian Creek	19,551 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Yale & Pettigrew
	1,336 private*		
Subtotal	20,887 acres		
Little Piney Watershed	11,529 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Ozone & Rosetta
	1,421 private*		
Subtotal	12,950 acres		
Lynn Hollow	3,748 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Boston
	571 private*		
Subtotal	4,319 acres		
Morgan Mountain	6,972 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Cass
	937 private*		
Subtotal	7,909 acres		
Sally Ann Hollow	5,993 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Hagarville & Rosetta
	1,627 private*		
Subtotal	7,620 acres		
Sarah Hollow	6,987 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Yale & Oark
	1,243 private*		
Subtotal	8,320 acres		
Wolf Pen Glade	1,932 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Yale & Oark
	5 private*		

Subtotal	1,937 acres		
Woods Mountain	5,800 federal	3-6 year burn rotation	Ludwig & Hagarville
	1,857 private*		
Subtotal	7,657 acres		
TOTAL	108,940 acres		

*Prescribed Fire-Private Lands – pending landowner approval through Wyden and Stevens Agreements only.

DECISION RATIONALE

The purpose and need for the proposed action was described in the project Environmental Assessment (EA).

- Restore ecosystem health and sustainable conditions in woodlands by reducing basal area and restoring the historic/natural fire regime.
- Restore ecosystem health and biodiversity on public lands containing non-native invasive plants through abatement of these species and recovery of native species.
- Enhance plant and wildlife diversity in woodlands and through early seral habitat maintenance.
- Improve habitat for threatened and endangered species (TES).
- Provide improved recreation opportunities for the public.

This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the 2005 Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Land and Resources Management Plan (USDA, 2005), and helps move the project area toward desired conditions described in that plan. Alternative 2 best responds to the purpose and need described in the EA. Alternative 2 responds to the purpose and need for the following reasons:

Ecosystem Restoration and Promoting Sustainable Ecosystems

The Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (RLRMP) states desired conditions for the vegetation communities found within the project area. Desired conditions for the Dry Oak Forest and Woodland include a sparse midstory and an understory supporting a diversity of herbaceous and woody species. Fire intolerant species, such as red maple, comprise a small component of species composition. Advanced oak regeneration is common in the understory. Desired conditions for the Shortleaf Pine-Oak Forest and Woodland include an overstory dominated by shortleaf pine, a sparse midstory and an understory characterized by a well-developed grass and herbaceous component. Abundance and influence of invasive non-native plants is low. Desired conditions for Rare and Special Communities (including glades, canebrakes and native grasslands) include exhibiting the composition, structure, and function necessary to support vigorous populations of species characteristic of the community. Prescribed burning and vegetation management are appropriate to restore these areas. Non-native invasive species are rare or absent and do not substantially affect community composition, structure, or function (USDA, 2005).

Historically, the lands that are now the Ozark – St. Francis National Forests consisted of fire-dependent woodland and forest ecosystems with well developed herbaceous understories. Currently, much of the ecosystem in the project area is considered unhealthy because the area lacks these forest conditions. This absence is due to a century of fire suppression and lack of vegetation management. The entire project area is within forest/grassland area described as Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) 2 and/or 3 and Fire Regime Group 1. Woodland restoration thinning coupled with prescribed burning will move the project area from FRCC 3 to FRCC 2 or FRCC 1. FRCC 1 is the most desirable fire regime condition class from an ecological and fire prevention perspective. Movement of ecosystems to FRCC 1 also assists in reducing wildfire intensity and spread, and related damage to private developments and resources on public lands. Existing ecological conditions in the project area include dense, overstocked forest, a shift from the historic plant community composition toward fire intolerant plant species, lack of herbaceous species diversity and insect epidemics.

As provided for in Alternative 2, implementing a prescribed fire rotation mimicking historic (prior to 1920) fire return intervals following non-commercial thinning will maintain open forest conditions with reduced inter-tree competition and increased herbaceous diversity.

The Need for the Abatement of NNIS and Recovery of Native Species

Non-native invasive species (NNIS) are becoming more prevalent on the Pleasant Hill Ranger District, leading to displacement of native vegetation and decreased habitat quality for wildlife. NNIS plants have a number of biological characteristics which render them difficult to control using fire, hand control, or mechanical controls only. Integrated invasive plant management techniques utilizing a combination of fire, mechanical and chemical methods often are most effective. As provided for in Alternative 2, implementation of a NNIS management strategy will reduce the spread of newly established NNIS populations and help the recovery of native species in areas of larger infestations. Feral hogs have become problematic on public lands. They are detrimental to native vegetation and compete with and/or prey upon native wildlife. As provided for in Alternative 2, implementation of feral hog control will be beneficial to native plants and wildlife.

The Need to Enhance Plant and Wildlife Diversity in Woodlands and Through Early Seral Habitat Maintenance

The Forests provide a wide variety of habitats that supports a diversity of wildlife species. Five of the Management Indicator Species (MIS) from the RLRMP are dependent upon early-successional habitat. Two MIS are dependent upon open forest conditions/woodlands. These disturbance-dependent MIS species population trends have been analyzed utilizing a variety of sources. (See EA page 4) Population monitoring associated with these sources shows the status of these seven species as such:

- Deer populations are stable to increasing over the last two decades based on harvest data.
- Black bear populations are stable to increasing; however, to maintain quality habitat over time, there is a need to maintain early seral habitat as a habitat component.
- Northern bobwhite populations are decreasing due to a lack of pine/oak woodland and native grassland areas.
- Population trends for turkey are stable to declining. This is a result of poor brood recruitment for multiple consecutive years. However, in 2012 the Arkansas Game and Fish

Commission (AGFC annual turkey survey indicated an upward trend in turkey poults. In addition, downward trends in early-successional habitat will likely produce a negative effect on brood habitat in the future for turkey.

- Prairie warbler populations are decreasing primarily due to lack of young age-class forest (regenerating forest communities).
- Brown-headed nuthatches are dependent on open pine forest and woodlands. Populations of this species are decreasing in the Arkansas – Central Highlands Region. Available habitat is a limiting factor for this species.
- Red-headed woodpeckers are dependent on open oak woodlands. Populations of this species are stable to decreasing. Available habitat is a limiting factor.

The seven disturbance-dependent MIS analyzed in the EA will benefit from woodland restoration, prescribed fire and maintenance of early seral habitat in wildlife openings with implementation of Alternative 2.

Hunter, et al. (2001) identified species of disturbance-dependent birds which are declining in the central hardwoods area. Forty-three species of disturbance-dependent birds potentially occur within the analysis area. Seven of these species are identified as disturbance dependent Bird Species of Conservation Concern that are declining in the Central Hardwoods Bird Conservation Region (BCR). These 43 species found within the analysis area will benefit from proposed vegetation treatments due to their reliance upon disturbance-associated habitats. Implementation of Alternative 2 will best meet the habitat needs of these Bird Species of Conservation Concern. (See EA page 5)

The Need to Improve Habitat for Region 8 Sensitive Species

The biological evaluation for this project identified 10 Region 8 sensitive species and five proposed, threatened or endangered species known or suspected to be present in the project area which require open (unshaded) and/or fire adapted and dependent habitats, or will benefit from vegetation management. These species will best benefit from implementation Alternative 2.

The Need to Improve Recreational Opportunities

Use of public lands for wildlife related recreation is becoming increasingly important with population increases and development of private lands. Woodland areas containing greater herbaceous diversity and abundance provide improved wildlife habitat for several species of importance to the public – including white tailed deer, wild turkey, bobwhite quail, resident passerine birds and neo-tropical migratory birds. Early seral habitat provided in wildlife openings and native warm season grass habitat help meet habitat requirements for these same wildlife species which are important to the public for recreation. Opportunities for sport fishing on the National Forest are of importance to the public. Implementation of Alternative 2 will best improve recreational opportunities for wildlife viewing, hunting and sport fishing on public lands.

The Pleasant Hill Wildlife Habitat Improvement EA documents the environmental analysis and conclusions upon which the decision to implement Alternative 2 is based.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This action was originally listed as a proposal on the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Schedule of Proposed Actions and updated periodically during the analysis. The public were invited to review and comment on the proposal during public scoping and through a Legal Notice of Opportunity to Comment on the Draft EA. Public scoping was conducted by the Ranger District from May 14 through June 15, 2014. Comments were solicited by mailing the project scoping letter to the list of interested Native American groups and list of interested citizens maintained by the Ranger District. A legal notice announcing the availability of the Draft EA was published in the newspaper of record (“The Graphic”, Clarksville, AR) on January 21, 2015. This legal notice provided the public with a designated comment period of January 22 through February 20, 2015, information regarding the proposal and how to provide comments. No public comments were received.

The EA lists agencies and people consulted on page 105.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision is consistent with the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan. All of the planned actions associated with Alternative 2 are consistent with the management prescriptions and management practices for the Management Areas as specified in the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP). The actions are also consistent with the LRMP because mitigation measures for impacts shall be fully applied in implementation.

A Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and EA were considered. I determined these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will not be prepared.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The significance of environmental impacts must be considered in terms of context and intensity. This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human and national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. In the case of a site-specific action, significance usually depends upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Intensity refers to the severity or degree of impact. (40 CFR 1508.27)

CONTEXT

The geographical context for environmental impacts is all lands within the proclamation boundary of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, Pleasant Hill Ranger District. Members of the public at local, regional and national levels who utilize public lands for recreation will be affected by the proposal. Local and regional publics who participate in habitat improvement work will also be affected by the proposal.

INTENSITY

The intensity of effects was considered in terms of the following:

1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial.** Considering the intensity of adverse effects there will be no significant long-term effects on the human environment from this project.
2. **The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.** There will be no significant effects on public health and safety. Based on the analysis, there should be no significant long-term cumulative effects on human health from implementation of herbicide use, manual/mechanical vegetation treatments, or prescribed fire associated with Alternative 2. (See EA pages 78-86)
3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area based upon analysis found in the EA. (See EA pages 27–39, 54–58, 72-78)
4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known credible scientific controversy over the impacts of the proposed action. (See EA pages 27-104)
5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The Agency has considerable experience with actions like the one proposed. The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. (See EA pages 27-104)
6. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, based upon analysis found in the EA. (See EA pages 27-104)
7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** The cumulative impacts are not significant. The cumulative effects of the proposed actions have been analyzed with consideration of other similar activities on adjacent lands, in consideration of past actions, and in consideration of foreseeable future actions. (See EA pages 27-104)
8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.** The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and will also not cause loss or destruction or significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources based upon analysis found in the EA. (See EA pages 54-58)

9. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.** The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. This finding is supported by analysis in the EA and the associated Biological Evaluation for the project. (See EA pages 72-77)

Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations such as the Antiquities Act, Endangered Species Act, Clear Air Act, Clean Water Act and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act were considered in the EA (see EA pages 19-21, 27-34, 39-58 and 72-78). The action is consistent with the Ozark-St. Francis National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. (See EA page ii)

After considering the effects of the actions analyzed, in terms of context and intensity, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

OBJECTION OPPORTUNITIES

This decision was subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218, and a legal notice of the opportunity to object was published on January 21, 2015, in the *The Graphic* – Clarksville, AR. No comments were received from the public during either the designated Public Scoping period or the designated 30-day Opportunity to Comment Period (EA). Therefore, no Legal Notice of Opportunity to Object is required.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision may be implemented any time after the date of signature.

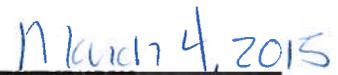
CONTACT

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Patricia Kowalewycz, District Ranger, Pleasant Hill Ranger District, 2591 Highway 21, Clarksville, AR 72830, 479-754-2864 ext. 2886.



Patricia Kowalewycz

District Ranger



Date



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