

BOBBS FORK QUEEN PROJECT

Proposed Action, Purpose and Need, Decision to be Made

PROPOSED ACTION

WHO: The USDA-Forest Service, Allegheny National Forest (ANF) Bradford Ranger District proposes the Bobbs Fork Queen Project.

WHERE: Please see attachments Appendix A, Tables 1-3 and Maps 2, 3 & 4 for site specific details and locations.

WHAT: The proposed activities would provide an estimated 6.5 million board feet (MMBF) of wood during an initial entry that would occur in the next two to five years. An additional 8.4 MMBF of wood from second entries anticipated in nine to 15 years from now would help meet people's demands for wood products. Generally, reforestation treatments would follow proposed harvest. The ANF Forest Plan (USDA 1986, as amended), Management Area (MA) objectives and the Purpose and Need for this project will be described in the next section.

The existing vegetation condition of the Bobbs Fork Queen Project Area, (BRQPA), will be moved to its desired future vegetation condition as described in the ANF – Forest Plan, 1986. A summary of the proposal within the BFQPA follows.

Proposed tree harvesting and reforestation activities, (Map 2, Appendix A – Table 1), include the following:

Regeneration Harvests: Mature, forested stands are regenerated through an even-aged management system, creating young forests.

- ***Shelterwood seed cut /Removal cut (797 acres):*** There are two entry sequences where vegetation will be regenerated through a shelterwood seed cut that will be followed by a removal cut.
- ***Removal cut (321 acres):*** Final entry harvests (overstory trees removed except for residual and wildlife trees) will occur to develop seedling growth.
- ***2-Age Harvest (17 acres):*** A regeneration sequence will be completed where large mature trees are left on the site through the next rotation creating two distinct age classes.

Intermediate Harvests:

- ***Commercially thin (443 acres):*** Will enhance vigor, growth, and health of forested areas.
- ***White Pine Release (37 acres):*** Complete commercial thinning activities in stands with vigorous white pine mid-stories or understories to increase white pine height growth and health.
- ***Hemlock Release (6 acres):*** Complete commercial thinning activities to increase growth and health of hemlock.
- ***Conifer Thin (37 acres):*** Complete commercial thinning activities in Red Pine plantations to maintain and/or improve their health and vigor.

Reforestation Treatments: Reforestation treatments and monitoring determine when adequate seedlings become established. Tree seedling development is encouraged through a variety of forest tools and methods. Development of a diversity of tree species is encouraged.

- ***Herbicide (2005 acres):*** Competing vegetation will be killed using ground based application equipment, as needed, during the latter part of the growing season (mid-July through mid September). Herbicides aid tree seedling, shrub, and forb establishment to encourage the development of more diverse forested areas. They control undesired ground and some mid-story vegetation that interferes with the tree regeneration process. New growth begins to develop one season after the herbicide application. Acres of herbicide application amounts are listed at the upper limit required for regeneration success; actual acres treated will likely be less. Application will be made following timber harvest, other reforestation activities, and monitoring of understory vegetation conditions, and will be based on the vegetation and environmental conditions at that time.
- ***Site Preparation (1490 acres):*** Mid-story beech, striped maple or other interfering woody stems (approximately five to 30 feet tall) will be hand or mechanically cut to prevent interference of new, diverse tree seedling growth and development.
- ***Fencing (887 acres):*** Deer exclusion fences will be installed to promote tree seedling growth and understory diversity by preventing deer from browsing on desired seedlings.
- ***Mechanical Scarification (648 acres):*** Mechanical tools will scarify the forest floor to encourage the establishment of oak seedlings.
- ***Controlled Burn (1494 acres):*** A controlled burn will be applied to control competing vegetation in oak stands and to promote oak seedling growth and development.
- ***Slash Treatment (37 acres):*** Pile and burn slash following thinning in red pine stands to reduce fuel loading and the risk for insect infestations.
- ***Release (1801 acres):*** Promote diverse saplings and less common tree species by manually removing small, mid-story stems that may interfere with tree seedling and sapling growth and development in areas between 5 and 15 years old.
- ***Planting (90 acres):*** Establish a seedling component within old stands that are over stocked with non-desirable herbaceous and woody vegetation.
- ***Fertilize (140 acres):*** To accelerate growth of desirable species and advance them above competing vegetation.

Timber Stand Improvements:

- ***Non-commercially thin (594 acres):*** Will enhance forest health and tree growth.
- ***Enhance understory conditions (118 acres):*** The use of fire, chemical and mechanical tools will enhance the understory conditions of fire adapted oak communities (no proposed timber harvest).

Activities to Enhance Late Successional Forest Conditions:

- ***RUMFC – Restore Understory Mature Forest Condition (443 acres):*** Will restore and enhance the understory conditions within mature stands to increase the long term development of vertical and horizontal diversity.

Other Vegetation Treatments:

- ***Continue Existing Research (4 acres):*** Continue ongoing study of vegetation treatments by the Northeast Research Station.
- ***Maintain Savannas (11 acres):*** Maintain ground layer plant vigor where fire adapted species (blueberry and huckleberry) occur using fire.

Proposed wildlife habitat improvements, (Map 4, Appendix A – Table 2) include the following:

- ***Apply Herbicide to Openings (23 acres):*** Wildlife cover and forage conditions will be improved by removing interfering vegetation and noxious weeds.

- **Apply Herbicide to Pole Stands (147 acres):** Wildlife cover and forage conditions will be improved by removing interfering vegetation and noxious weeds.
- **Prune and Release (53 acres):** Prune and release apple trees to promote apple production and increase the health and vigor of apple trees.
- **Fence Openings (13 acres):** Mast/fruit trees will be fenced to provide forage and cover for wildlife while deterring deer browsing.
- **Plant and Fence (97 acres):** Mast/fruit trees and shrubs will be planted and fenced to provide forage and cover for wildlife while deterring deer browsing.
- **Plant and Cut Aspen Trees (14 acres):** Plant and cut aspen to provide structure for early age class trees and to help maintain both aspen and other species diversity.
- **Opening Expansion/Construction (8 acres):** Eliminate dense fern interference and promote development of herbaceous vegetation on the site.
- **Opening Release (5 acres):** Prevent the encroachment of woody vegetation and help maintain desired herbaceous cover on the site.
- **Opening Restoration (15 acres):** The wildlife opening and grassland will be improved by restoration of grasses through mechanical and hand tools.
- **Create Canopy Gaps (127 acres):** Create canopy gaps to promote development of herbaceous and seedling vegetation and create a more diverse stand.
- **Site Preparation (9 acres):** Reduce woody vegetation on the site and maintain desired cover.
- **Planting Warm Season/Cool Season Grass Strips (45 acres):** Establish a desired herbaceous cover on the site.
- **Prescribed Burning (23 acres):** Maintain desired warm season grasses on the site.

The following Roads Analysis Project (RAP) recommendations (Map 3, Appendix A – Table 3) are carried forward as part of the BFQPA:

Road Construction:

- **New Corridor:** Construct two new road segments (proposed Forest Roads – FR 209B (0.7 mile) and FR 723 extension (0.5 mile)), totaling approximately 1.2 miles, to provide access for vegetation management. The Forest Service would need to acquire a Right-Of-Way (ROW) agreement before constructing FR 209B. The proposed FR 209B corridor would have one less stream crossing in comparison to a potential road corridor entirely on NFS land.
- **Existing Corridor:** Add approximately 3.6 miles of non-system roads (predominately OGM jurisdiction) on National Forest System (NFS) land to the Forest Road System to provide access for vegetation management.
- **Existing Corridor – ROW Needed:** Add approximately 3.5 miles of non-system roads with portions on non-NFS land to the Forest Road System. The Forest Service would need to acquire ROWs for these road segments before they are added to the Forest Road System to provide access for vegetation management.

Road Reconstruction:

- **Realign/Improve:** Realign and improve approximately 0.4 mile of FR 449D.

Road Management Changes:

- **Closed to Restricted:** Change the road management classification of FR 166E from closed to restricted (approximately 0.8 mile) to provide motor vehicle access to hunters.

Decommissioning/Mitigation:

- ***Decommission Forest Roads:*** Decommission 1.7 miles of FR 209 and 1.5 miles of FR 241, totaling approximately 3.2 miles of Forest Roads.
- ***Decommission Non-System Roads:*** Decommission approximately 26 miles of non-system roads or abandoned corridors.
- ***Remove Forest Roads from the NFS:*** Remove all of FR 422 (1.1 miles) and a segment of FR 449E (0.4 mile), totaling approximately 1.5 miles, from the Forest Road System.
- ***Negotiate With Private Mineral Owners to Mitigate Resource Damage from Non-System Roads:*** Negotiate with private mineral owners to mitigate or decommission approximately 7 miles of non-system roads located near or crossing streams.

Maintenance:

- ***Road Maintenance on Forest Roads:*** Perform road maintenance on approximately 36 miles of Forest Roads needed for vegetation management. As part of this road maintenance, the Forest Service will apply limestone on Forest Roads that parallel or cross streams. Roads will also have stream crossings replaced that are undersized or are barriers to fish passage. The amount of road maintenance that will occur is contingent upon funding.

Acquire ROWs:

- ***Acquire ROWs Agreements:*** Acquire ROW agreements for two Forest Road segments in order to improve them to the Forest Service Standards and Guidelines. The two Forest Road segments are portions of FR 449 (0.1 mile) and FR 723 (0.4 mile).

Pit Activity:

- ***Explore Areas and Develop Pits:*** Explore four areas for material needed for road construction and maintenance activities, and if adequate material exists, develop these potential pit sites up to two acres per site, totaling approximately 8 acres.
- ***Expand Existing Pits:*** Expand eleven existing pits up to one acre per site, totaling approximately 11 acres. Restore the depleted sections of these existing pit sites.
- ***Restore Existing Pits:*** Restore four depleted pit sites.

Proposed Recreation Activities, (Map 3), include the following:

North Country National Scenic Trail:

- Relocate 1.1 miles of the North Country National Scenic Trail off hard surface road to a more appropriate setting.

Project Design:

The proposed activities have been designed to meet the Forest Plan desired future condition and site specific purpose and need. In addition, activities have been designed to minimize effects by meeting ANF Forest Plan-Standards and Guidelines. These activities are designed to reduce effects to: water resources; sensitive soils; threatened, endangered and sensitive species and their habitats; heritage resources, visual resources and dispersed recreation sites. Reserved and outstanding mineral rights are protected. For burning proposals, a site specific burn plan will be developed.

WHEN: The Forest Service expects a decision of this proposal or an alternate proposal by November, 2007. Actions could be implemented five to 15 days following a potential appeal disposition.

ANF FOREST PLAN MANAGAEMENT AREA (MA) DIRECTION:

Since the ANF Proposed Forest Plan will be in effect before the BFQPA decision is to be made, the following section will describe the MA direction form both the ANF Forest Plan (1986) and the ANF Proposed Forest Plan (published in May 2006):

ANF Forest Plan (1986 amended):

MA 3.0 – 11,020 acres; (page 4-82): 1.) Provide a sustained yield of high-quality Allegheny hardwood and oak saw timber through even-aged management and a variety of age or size class habitat diversity from seedling to mature saw timber in a variety of timber types; 2.) Emphasize deer and turkey in all timber types and squirrel in the oak type; and 3.) Provide a roaded natural setting for all types of developed and dispersed recreation opportunities with an emphasis on motorized recreation activities.

MA 6.1 – 4,032 acres; (page 4-110): The emphasis in this management area is primarily for wildlife species and semi-primitive motorized dispersed recreation. Most roads are closed except for seasonal openings. Primary purposes of this MA include: 1.) Maintain or enhance scenic quality; 2.) Emphasize a variety of dispersed recreation activities in a semi-primitive motorized setting; and 3.) Emphasize wildlife species which require mature or over mature hardwood forests, such as turkey, bear, cavity-nesting birds and mammals.

Draft Environmental Impact Statement to Accompany the ANF Proposed Forest Plan, (published for comment in May 2006):

MA 2.2 - 77 acres; (page IV-8): This management area provides **late structural forest habitat** connected to other management areas that also provide late structural habitat to support species with viability concerns. Specific objectives include: 1.) Early structural habitat (0-20 years old in all forest types) is less than 4% of the management area at any time; 2.) Sufficient mid structural habitat is maintained to move toward a future condition of late structural habitat (>150 years old) on more than 70% of the management area.

MA 3.0 – 11,204 acres; (page IV-11 & IV-12): Vegetation management activities (**even-aged management**) provide a mix of high quality products that contribute to the local and regional economy. Specific objectives include: 1.) Maintain or create age and structural class diversity on lands suitable for timber management and provide high quality hardwood timber products, by regenerating stands using even-aged management within the first and second decades of plan implementation, in order to maintain 8 to 10 percent early structural habitat (0 to 20 years old) over time; 2.) In order to regulate stand densities and produce high quality hardwoods, thin stands within the first and second decades of plan implementation; 3.) Pre-commercially thin or release stands to: a.) Maintain or enhance tree species diversity; b.) Remove poorly formed and low-valued trees that compete with the potential crop trees; c.) Remove trees overtopping species that are less abundant in the stand that may not survive without release.

MA 6.1 – 3,771 acres; (page IV-20): A large part of this management area will progress to **late structural forest** conditions. Specific objectives include: 1.) Provide late structural habitat for species with viability concerns on more than 50 percent of the management area; 2.) Maintain and create structural diversity that features mature forest conditions to provide a maximum percent early structural (0 to 20 years old) and a minimum of 50 percent late structural (greater than 149 years old) conditions over time.

The final decision for this project will be consistent with the Final Forest Plan, (FEIS is scheduled to be issued in December 2006). After scoping comments are received, issues and alternatives for the BFQPA will be developed.

BACKGROUND:

The BFQPA is smaller than the Bobbs Fork Queen Roads Analysis Project (RAP), (See Map 3). The BFQPA contains approximately 134 miles of roads, consisting of 49 miles of National Forest System (NFS) roads, 10 miles of State and Township roads, and 75 miles of non-system roads. The NFS roads are managed for public motor vehicle use as follows: 29 miles are open year around, 10 miles are seasonally restricted, and 10 miles are closed year around. The BFQPA has approximately 26 miles of mixed use roads (roads being used as both roads and trails) and 30 miles of non-system roads.

Private oil and gas development has occurred throughout the project area, but predominately with older wells in the southern portion of the project area. OGM roads, (non-system), in varying degrees of condition from vegetated grass to wheel ruts to bare ground have been determined as the greatest likelihood of spreading sediment, as they were not built to Forest Service standards and guidelines and stream crossings do not have limestone surfacing on approaches.

The BFQPA is located within the East Hickory Creek Watershed and the Tionesta Creek Watershed. The East Hickory Creek Watershed is within the 13% of the ANF that flows directly into the Allegheny River without being impounded. This is described in the 1998 ANF Biological Assessment for threatened and endangered species. Sedimentation draining into the river could potentially affect two endangered species of mussels. The majority of the project area, (13,088 acres), is within the 13 percent area of the ANF. Standards and Guidelines and mitigations will be applied to minimize sediment that could potentially reach the Allegheny River.

PURPOSE AND NEED (WHY): The following statements describe the purpose and need for this project:

- 1. There is a need to minimize potential sedimentation draining directly into the Allegheny River:**
 - Provide a transportation system to facilitate the activities proposed while reducing potential sedimentation in streams draining into the Allegheny River.
- 2. There is a need to create early age classes:**
 - Adequate amounts of early age classes should be spatially distributed across the landscape to provide for a sustained yield of high quality hardwoods (USDA-FS, ANF Forest Plan 1986a, pp. 4-82 to 4-96). This amount will improve habitat diversity across the landscape. Early successional habitat within the

project area and across the region has been declining. Maintaining the seedling, shrub, and herbaceous diversity of the BFQPA is needed. The understory vegetation is transitioning to red maple through selective browsing by deer which has resulted in reducing the understory diversity.

3. There is a need to regenerate oak stands:

- Treatments are needed to ensure the long term perpetuation of the oak forest community within the project area. Reintroducing fire to this project area is needed to maintain the oak forest type (Abrams, 2005, Abrams, Downs 1990). Research on the ANF identified a historical link in oak distribution to Native American burning (Ruffner, et al., 1997).

4. There is a need to provide quality hardwood products:

- Meeting the public's demand for wood products such as furniture, paper, fiber, and construction materials is one objective for this project (USDA-FS, ANF Forest Plan 1986a, pp. 4-2 to 4-3).

5. There is a need to enhance wildlife habitat and increase hunter access:

- Wildlife use of an area is significantly affected by the availability of hard mast and providing for the long-term retention of oak is necessary to maintain or improve wildlife distribution and activities that increase the amount of diversity of hard mast and help to retain the oak forest community should be pursued.
- Although decades of over-browsing by deer have reduced stand structure and diversity, based on the recent increase in oak seedling and understory diversity, it is apparent that the deer herd has been reduced in all but the most remote portions of the project area. As a result, there is an opportunity at this time to improve understory diversity and stand structure and activities that will create the desired light conditions to develop the desired understory vegetation.
- Although Forest Plan direction related to wildlife within MA 6.1 is to provide a land condition that is primarily made up of mature or over mature forest, many mature forest wildlife species prefer or require the structure provided by a small seedling habitat component. Considering less than 2% of MA 6.1 lands contain a seedling habitat, activities that will improve the distribution of this habitat component need to be pursued.
- Although there is presently very little seedling habitat within MA 6.1, large blocks of pole habitat occurs on almost 16% of these lands. Because the deer herd is down in much of the project area, there is an opportunity to enhance the structure of these large blocks of pole habitat by creating canopy gaps that will promote a small seedling habitat component and non-commercial activities to accomplish this should be pursued.
- The Forest Plan provides specific direction related to improving openings for wildlife (USDA-FS 1986 p. 4-31). Further, because many existing openings lack the cover and forage conditions preferred by many wildlife species, there is a need to improve vegetation diversity and structure within these openings.

- Hunting is considered the single most important factor affecting deer density within the project area and actual deer numbers are largely a function of hunter access and success. Although deer numbers are down, it is important to maintain hunter pressure and road management activities that encourage and maintain hunter pressure.
- The cerulean warbler is considered an oak obligate on the ANF and Forest monitoring indicates that gaps in the forest canopy are important to the distribution of this species. Monitoring also indicates that higher densities occur in mature stands where the canopy has been opened up through timber harvest and that preferred stands tend to have a larger white oak component. As a result management should pursue a combination of commercial and non-commercial treatments in an effort to provide preferred habitat condition and increase densities of cerulean warblers within the project area. Because higher densities of cerulean warbler have already been documented within the project area, monitoring activities that document the response of this species to treatments should also be pursued.

6. There is a need to manage the North Country National Scenic Trail:

- There is a need to reroute the North Country National Scenic Trail from the hard surface State Route 666 to a more appropriate location.

DECISION TO BE MADE (WHAT):

The Bradford District Ranger is the responsible official. The decision is to whether or not to approve the proposed action, an alternative to the proposal, or to take no action at this time.