



File Code: 1950-1

Date: August 28, 2009

Dear Interested Party:

The Marienville Ranger District of the Allegheny National Forest (ANF) is proposing to continue the prescribed burning of herbaceous openings, primarily warm season grasses, within and near the Buzzard Swamp Wildlife Management Area (BSWMA), burning up to 200 acres annually for the next 5 to 10 years. The proposed project area is located within Warrants 2547, 3564, 3643, 4133 and 4136 of Jenks Township in Forest County and Warrants 2790 and 4134 of Millstone Township in Elk County, Pennsylvania. The proposed prescribed burning would occur outside of the nesting season (April 15 to September 15) unless sites have been surveyed and it is determined that species with viability concerns are not nesting in these areas.

Back ground

The BSWMA consists of approximately 1,122 acres and contributes to the desired condition in the ANF Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) by providing open bodies of water, wetland vegetation and species dependent on aquatic, wetland, and riparian habitat. Large managed openings are maintained on the drier sites with interspersed inclusions of aspen, other hardwoods, conifers, and shrubs. A portion of the BSWMA is managed as a waterfowl propagation area in cooperation with the Pennsylvania Game Commission. The BSWMA contains some of the few large open grassland areas found on the ANF.

On March 25, 2004, Marienville District Ranger, Leon F. Blashock signed a decision memo for the Buzzard Swamp Prescribed Burn project to prescribe burn up to 150 acres of herbaceous openings annually within the BSWMA for the next 5 years. During the last 5 years, 115 acres were burned in April 2004; 101 acres, in April 2006; 23 acres, in 2008, and 102 acres, in 2009. No prescribed burning occurred in 2005 or 2007 due to unfavorable weather conditions. On May 5, 2007, Marienville District Ranger, Robert T. Fallon signed the consistency review for the Buzzard Swamp Prescribed Burn project that determined the project was consistent with the revised 2007 ANF Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP).

Purpose and Need

The proposed prescribed burning areas are located primarily within the BSWMA (Management Area [MA] 6.3) but also include areas within MA 2.2, 3.0, and 6.1 near the BSWMA. The goals and objectives for these management areas are discussed on pages 109, 110, 113, 114, 126, 127, 129, and 130 of the ANF LRMP.

The following goals and objectives were identified in the ANF LRMP:

- Maintain and enhance the distribution and diversity of plant and animal species by providing a diversity of high quality habitats across the landscape. (ANF LRMP, p. 14)
- Provide habitat for game species to make opportunities available for quality hunting and fishing experiences while promoting the management of game species that sustains healthy forest understories (ANF LRMP, p. 14).



- Conserve and enhance native plant diversity, abundance, and distribution across the ANF. Explore opportunities for habitat restoration/enhancement and/or establishment of species in suitable unoccupied habitat (ANF LRMP, p. 15).
- Use fire where appropriate to sustain and restore forest and non-forest vegetation communities (ANF LRMP, p. 15).
- Enhance wildlife habitat on 1,200 to 1,600 acres each year to provide desired cover and forage conditions (ANF LRMP, p. 20).
- Retain the existing savannah and grassland acreage in MA 6.3 (ANF LRMP, p. 129).

Prescribed burning is a very important management tool for maintaining and enhancing herbaceous openings. Fire has been an important natural part in the development of grasslands, forests and wetlands throughout history. For thousands of years, temperate grasslands and savannahs were maintained by periodic wildfires, caused by lightning or intentionally set by Native Americans, every two to 50 years.

Herbaceous openings can be maintained with fire to benefit vegetative species such as blueberry and wildlife species, such as grasshopper sparrows, Henslow's sparrows, bobolinks, meadowlarks, and eastern bluebirds. Prescribed burning controls woody vegetation encroachment and improves grasslands for use by nesting wildlife. Forest openings can be manipulated with fire to benefit more than 150 wildlife species. Upland nesting cover used by waterfowl and songbirds will remain productive if periodically burned. Burning can maintain and increase the amount of warm season grasses, which provide important habitat for grassland nesting birds and mammals and a food source for various species of wildlife.

Present day research and experience have shown that prescribed burning can be an effective management tool. Prescribed burns are used frequently to maintain and improve herbaceous openings. Prescribed burning can release nutrients in old plant growth, control woody plants and herbaceous weeds, improve forage, increase plant growth and biomass, reduce the risk of large wildfires, increase or maintain biodiversity, and improve wildlife habitat. To achieve the above benefits, fire must be used under very specific conditions, using very specific techniques. Prescribed burning is being proposed on approximately 313 acres (up to 200 acres annually). To maintain native grasses, it is necessary to periodically (every 3 to 5 years) remove the accumulation of plant residue. Prescribed burning is also more cost-effective than other treatments like bulldozing, cutting, or chemical applications.

Type of Analysis

This project falls within category of exclusion 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 220.6(e)(6). This category allows for "timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction." This falls within the categories of actions for which a project file and decision memo are required. The analysis will consider whether extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action warrant further consideration in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. Resource conditions that will be considered include: federally listed threatened or endangered species and Forest Service sensitive species; floodplains, wetlands, and municipal watersheds; Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, and national recreation areas; inventoried roadless areas; research natural

areas; American Indian and Alaska Native religious and cultural sites; and archaeological sites, and historical properties and areas (36 CFR 220.6(b)). The mere presence of one or more of these conditions does not preclude use of the category. The degree of the potential effect determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist. This decision will not be subject to appeal.

How to Comment

Submit written comments to Robert T. Fallon, Marienville District Ranger, 131 Smokey Lane, Marienville, PA 16239 or by facsimile (814) 927-2285. Submit hand-delivered comments to the Marienville District office, business hours are 8:00 am–4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Submit oral comments to the Marienville District office during normal business hours via telephone (814) 927-6628. Submit electronic comments to comments-eastern-allegheny-marienville@fs.fed.us using one of the following formats: e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Word (.doc), or any software supported by Microsoft applications. Comments, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered. Comments should be submitted or postmarked no later than September 28, 2009.

This scoping package is also available on the ANF website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/allegheny/projects/other/>. For additional information, contact Kevin Treese, district NEPA coordinator, at (814) 927-5759. Thank you for your interest in the management of the Allegheny National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jodie L. Vanselow (for):
ROBERT T. FALLON
District Ranger