

DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
for the
NON-NATIVE INVASIVE SPECIES TREATMENT PROJECT
USDA Forest Service
Tuskegee National Forest

Macon County, Alabama

1. INTRODUCTION

Southern forest systems are currently being threatened by Non-native Invasive Plant Species (NNIPS). The Tuskegee National Forest proposes to control priority Non-native Invasive Plant Species (NNIPS) infestations using a combination of mechanical and herbicide treatments. The project area encompasses the Tuskegee Ranger District, National Forests in Alabama, in Macon County Alabama. This action is needed, because it will improve the long-term health of the Tuskegee National Forest and will implement the National Forests in Alabama Land and Revised Resource Management Plan (RLRMP) forest-wide goals, objectives and standards.

On Dec. 4, 2008, a proposal to treat NNIPS on the Tuskegee Ranger District was sent out to a mailing list of interested individuals and groups. Treatment methods which could be used to control NNIS included manual, mechanical, cultural, and chemical treatments. Based on comments from the public, internal interdisciplinary team members, and other interagency cooperators, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared which described the proposed action and the No Action alternative and the potential effects associated with each alternative. Comments on the draft EA were solicited from the individuals and groups which responded to the scoping notice. Their input was used to help the deciding officials arrive at a final decision.

2. DECISION AND RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

Purpose and Need

This proposal was developed to address one of the biggest biological threats to our National Forests – native species biodiversity and habitat loss due to NNIPS. The purpose of this multi-year activity is to reduce or eliminate impacts from NNIPS populations in order to protect the integrity of natural plant communities. Several forest health and native ecosystem restoration goals and objectives outlined in the revised Land and Resource Management Plan (LMP) for the National Forests in Alabama (2004) will be met as a result of this proposal. The proposed action will:

- Minimize adverse effects of invasive native and non-native species. Control such species where feasible and necessary to protect national forest resources.
- Contribute to the viability of native and other desirable wildlife species.
- Enhance, restore, manage, and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities.

The Environmental Assessment (EA) documents the ability of the proposed action and the No Action alternative to meet these goals and objectives.

Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives which include the best available science, I have decided to implement **Alternative 2, the Proposed Action**. This decision will move the area towards the desired conditions identified in the Forest Plan by minimizing adverse effects of invasive native and nonnative species, contributing to the viability of native and other desirable wildlife species, and enhancing, restoring, managing, or creating habitats for native plants and animals.

The proposed action will implement manual, mechanical, cultural, and chemical methods to control or eradicate NNIS, utilizing an adaptive management approach. The use of an adaptive management strategy allows the Forest Service to anticipate changes in the species (i.e. infestations of new species) and the best methods for their control (i.e. new chemicals) as they change and evolve.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, we considered one other alternative for implementation. A comparison of the alternatives can be found in Chapter 2 of the EA. We also considered the alternative that was not given detailed study in the EA.

Alternative 1- No Action

Under this alternative, non-native invasive plant populations would persist and continue to spread to adjacent areas. Existing trends across the landscape would be expected to continue. Ongoing Forest Service permitted and approved activities would continue; for example, road maintenance, fire suppression, hunting, fishing, and camping would continue to occur within the project area.

We eliminated the No Action Alternative from consideration because it would not move towards meeting the purpose and need for the project. Adverse effects of NNIS would not be minimized, viability of native species would not be protected, and native habitats would not be restored.

Alternatives Eliminated from Detailed Study

We considered an additional alternative that would treat NNIS without the use of herbicides. NNIS would be treated through the use of fire, hand control, or mechanical controls only. This alternative was eliminated from detailed study due to the inherent biological characteristics which render NNIS difficult to control with cultural or mechanical treatments alone. Many exhibit rapid growth rates, lack natural controls, are very good competitors, and produce abundant and early seed. Most NNIS plants are perennials, with extensive tough runners or roots which readily re-sprout after cutting. Mechanical and cultural treatments do not control the roots. Prescribed fire often results in rapid re-growth and colonization of some NNIS species. Based on this, it would be impractical to rely only on cultural and mechanical means of control of NNIS. Therefore, we eliminated this alternative from consideration.

3. PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

The Forest Botanist and District staff gathered known locations of invasive species infestations in 2007 and 2008.

On November 13, 2008, a pre-scoping meeting was held to gather internal input. Attendees included Ryan Shurette (Forest Botanist), Dagmar Thurmond (Forest Biologist), Willie Humphrey, Forester, Tuskegee Ranger District), Jay Edwards (Forest Hydrologist), Art Goddard (Forest Soil Scientist), John Moran (Forest Fisheries Biologist), and Felicia Humphrey (Forest Planner).

As part of the public involvement process, the proposal was published in the Forest Service Schedule of Proposed Actions (Oct.1 – Dec. 31) and was printed in the newspaper of record (*The Tuskegee News*) on Dec. 4, 2008. In addition, letters describing the proposed project were mailed to interested parties and individuals that had commented on district projects in the past. One written reply was received from the Daphne Field Office of the Fish and Wildlife Service and is located in the project file.

A draft EA was released to interested publics and a Request for Comments public notice was posted in *The Tuskegee News* on April 30, 2009 for a 30-day comment period. No written or oral responses were received from the public.

4. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

After considering the environmental effects described in the Environmental Assessment, we have determined that the actions associated with Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27).

Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. We base our finding on the following:

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered. Impacts associated with the project are discussed in Chapter 3 of the EA. These impacts are within the range of those identified in the Forest Plan. Our finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action.
2. The selected alternative will not result in significant effects on public health and safety, and implementation will be in accordance with project design features (EA, Chapter 2).
3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the geographic area such as park lands, historical and cultural resources, prime farmlands, wetlands, floodplains, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas. (EA, Chapter 3).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project.
5. We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (EA Chapter 3).
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because they do not represent a decision in principle about future proposals.
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant. The EA includes all connected, cumulative, and similar actions in the scope of the analysis. The cumulative effects of past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions are considered and disclosed in the EA, Chapter 3.
8. The proposed action includes use of an implementation checklist which requires archaeological clearance prior to implementation. Heritage resources will be protected through avoidance as needed. 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 of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. (EA, Chapter 3).
9. Implementing this decision will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or result in the loss of any other species' viability, or create significant trends toward federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act (EA Chapter 3 and Biological Evaluation).

10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the National Forests in Alabama Land and Resource Management Plan (EA, Chapter 1).

5. FINDINGS REQUIRED BY LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This project is consistent with the Forest Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest as required by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) 1976, 16 USC 1604(1). It is consistent with the Forest Goals and Objective listed in the purpose and need for the project. The project was designed to conform to land and resource management plan standards and incorporates them in the implementation.

6. ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(e)(1). Notice of the proposed action was published. An opportunity to comment on the EA was provided. All comments were supportive of the proposal, and/or provided non-substantive comments.

7. CONTACT INFORMATION

For further information on this decision contact Ryan Shurette, Forest Botanist, National Forests in Alabama Supervisor's Office, 2946 Chestnut St., Montgomery Alabama 36107.

6736. For information on the Forest Service planning process as it relates to this decision, contact Felicia Humphrey, Forest Planner, at 334-832-4470.

8. IMPLEMENTATION and MITIGATION

Implementation may begin immediately after publication of a legal notice in the newspaper of record, *The Tuskegee News*.

Activities associated with this project will be conducted within the limits set by the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama.

Prior to treatment, areas planned for application would be analyzed for PETS or other resource concerns.

Herbicide treatment(s) occurring within or adjacent to rare communities would be analyzed on a case by case, site specific basis to ensure the treatment would be conducted in a manner that would not cause adverse effects to the rare community

and would be to the benefit of any rare or Sensitive species present in the long term.

Certain glyphosate product formulations have been shown to be toxic to some aquatic animals and will be avoided when possible. A list of preferable formulations is located in the project file.

The present environmental analysis (EA) is on a planning level and while some areas of NNIPS have been identified on the Tuskegee National Forest, no activities have been planned for specific areas. Site-specific maps and a description of the planned activities for each year will be provided for the Forest Archeologist to review. Archeological surveys will be conducted in any areas not previously surveyed. The review of the proposed eradication activities for each year will be forwarded to the Alabama SHPO and Interested Tribes along with the results of any survey conducted. This will allow the SHPO to comment on the archeological resource, and the THPO's an opportunity to comment on the archeological resource and the use of herbicides.

Any ground disturbing mechanical treatment would follow the standards and guidelines established in the Forest Plan and the Forest Archeologist would be consulted prior to the activity (See Heritage Resource Section in Chapter 3).

9. RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

/s/ Stephanie Love
Acting for
Jorge Hersel
Tuskegee District Ranger

7/30/2009
Date