

DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
for the
**Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Restoration and
Improvement Project in the Sweetwater and Coleman Lake Area**
July 2009

**USDA Forest Service
Southern Region
Talladega National Forest
Shoal Creek Ranger District
Cleburne County, Alabama**

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Background

In the past, it is estimated that longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) may have occupied 60 million acres across the southern United States, and today it occupies less than 4 million acres. Restoring longleaf pine to appropriate sites on the Shoal Creek Ranger District is an important component of our management of natural resources. Longleaf pines are important, not only because of their being critical to RCW habitat, but also because of their resistance to southern pine beetle attacks. The fire dependent longleaf pine ecosystem was the most prevalent forest type in the south during pre-settlement times. The natural, upland community was primarily longleaf pine with associated shrubs and fire tolerant hardwoods and understory.

Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), there are legislative requirements to positively manage for endangered species like the RCW on Federal lands. A prime objective of the Shoal Creek Ranger District is to comply with the ESA by providing habitat for the recovery of the RCW by restoring and managing a pine ecosystem, which furnishes preferred habitat for RCW foraging and nesting.

Existing habitat is not suitable for the RCW within the project area on the Shoal Creek Ranger District. A majority of the pine stands within the project area have excessive amounts of pine stems beyond the preferred habitat requirements (see Revised RCW Recovery Plan). Preferred habitat is between 40 and 70 basal area (BA), while current stand information within the project area shows basal areas between 80 and 170 sq.ft./ac. Thus, at present, stands do not provide the open park-like stands that the RCW needs for suitable habitat. RCWs require open areas of mature pines 60 years and older for nesting. Foraging habitats vary in age but usually are areas that are pine savannas with little, if any, midstory of hardwood (USFWS, 2003a). In light of this, the Shoal Creek Ranger District of the Talladega National Forest has conducted an analysis of the potential benefits and effects of habitat restoration for the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker. The

Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Restoration and Improvement Project in the Sweetwater and Coleman Lake Area Environmental Assessment documents that analysis.

The Red Cockaded Woodpecker Recovery Plan and the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan mandate the Shoal Creek Ranger District to work towards providing more useable foraging and breeding habitat for the RCW. In the future, it is hoped that this will allow the Shoal Creek Ranger District to increase the number of RCW breeding pairs that it can support. Since 2001, approximately 810 acres have been planted to longleaf pine seedlings and over the next 5 years approximately 1200 acres are planned to be planted with longleaf pine seedlings.

The environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of 2 alternatives to meet this need.

Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement a modified version of Alternative 2. The following is a description of Alternative 2 as it was proposed.

- Thin approximately 1004 acres in Compartments 31-35 and 38-41 to reduce stands to a 60 – 80 square-foot basal area (BA).
- Clearcut with reserves on approximately 493 acres of stands occupied by off-site loblolly pine and then planting longleaf or shortleaf pine in Compartments 31, 34, 38, 39, and 41.
- First Thinning on approximately 357 acres in Compartments 31, 32, 34, and 38-40. These loblolly pine stands are 25 – 40 years old and are overstocked with basal areas ranging from 90 – 170 sq.ft./ac.
- Conduct Timber Stand Improvement on approximately 74 acres.
- Conduct Pre-commercial Thinning on approximately 44 acres.
- Conduct Midstory removal on approximately 102 acres.
- Conduct prescribed burning of approximately (5740 acres) over the next several years, including growing season burns within recruitment stands to control midstory vegetation (already analyzed in Prescribed Burning CE).
- Make improvements to the Warden Station Horse Camp including, developing a host site with electricity, improving roads in the Horse Camp, designating camping sites, installing additional SST's (vault toilets), and installing traffic barriers.
- Use and maintain, to proper maintenance level and standards, the existing permanent road system. Annual maintenance, including blading, graveling/surface replacement, and mowing, and some pre-haul maintenance, including reshaping and ditch work for proper drainage, would occur on existing permanent roads in the project area prior to initiation of RCW habitat restoration activities.
- Construct approximately 2 miles of temporary road;
- Reopen and rehabilitate approximately 4.5 miles of temporary roads to access timber stands and utilize existing log landings within the project area where possible. These roads were used the last time timber was removed from the area (approximately 15 years ago), and reopening them would only involve minor disturbance. Understory vegetation would be

cleared from the surfaces of these temporary roads, and gravel would be spread in dips, on slopes exceeding 10 percent, and at intersections with surfaced roads.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered 1 other alternative. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in the EA on page 2-8.

Alternative 1

No Action

Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. Prescribed burning would continue to take place along the regular 3 – 5 year rotation for any given stand on the district. No vegetation management would take place to restore or improve RCW habitat in any of the stands in the project area.

RATIONALE FOR THE DECISION

Based on the analysis presented in the *Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Restoration and Improvement Project in the Sweetwater and Coleman Lake Area EA*, I have decided to select Alternative 2 because it best meets the purpose and need and the Forest-wide Goals discussed above. The following is the rationale for my decision.

I first eliminated the No Action Alternative (Alternative 1) since it failed to meet the purpose and need established for the project in several ways. The No Action Alternative would violate the direction given in the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama (pg 3-35), which states that management for Red-cockaded Woodpecker habitat will be based on sections 3 and 4 of the Record of Decision of the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and its Habitat on National Forests in the Southern Region. Under the No Action Alternative, prescribed burning would continue but that will not move the stands in the project area towards the desired future condition of being suitable RCW foraging and nesting habitat.

This left Alternative 2 (Proposed Action). I found Alternative 2 (Proposed Action) superior because it provides for better meeting guidelines set forth in the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama (Goal 12, Forest Wide Standard 7.D-08 and Objectives 1.1, 1.4, 12.1 and 12.4), and having a greater beneficial effect on the RCW over the long-term.

Activities proposed under Alternative 2 would minimize negative impacts to the quality of RCW habitat on the forest. Alternative 2 would further build upon efforts to restore longleaf pine on the district, by continuing to expand acres of suitable RCW habitat. This action responds to the standards and objectives outlined in the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (January 2004), and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan (p2-10).

I have decided to modify Alternative 2, by implementing a lesser treatment on 5 stands. Four of these stands (34003, 38001, 39018, and 39033) were analyzed as restoration treatment (clearcut with reserves and then planting), but will have RCW thinning treatments implemented due to an existing large component of hardwoods in these stands and the desire to not convert stands having significant hardwood components to longleaf pine. These four stands will be thinned according to the RCW thinning prescription to 60 – 80 sq.ft. of basal area. Stand 31001 was to be RCW thinned to 40 – 50 sq.ft. of basal area, and will instead be thinned to 50 – 60 sq.ft. of basal area. In each of these five stands any environmental effects will remain equal or be lessened from how these stands were analyzed, by implementing this less intensive treatment. Changing these five stands, results in 360 acres of longleaf pine restoration and 1121 acres of RCW thinning as opposed to the 477 and 1004 acres proposed, respectively. See the attached map for the highlighted stands where the treatment to be implemented has changed from how it was analyzed in the environmental analysis documentation. The remainder of Alternative 2 will be implemented as described above in the proposed action description.

Restoring longleaf pine to sites, historically occupied by longleaf pine, but currently stocked by other species is to be implemented on 360 acres. Restoration of shortleaf pine is also to be implemented on 16 acres. This restoration will be implemented by a clearcut method while reserving existing longleaf pine for purposes other than supplying natural regeneration. In the majority of these stands, 0 – 10 sq.ft. of basal area of longleaf pine will be left on site. It is desirable to have 30 sq.ft. of basal area of longleaf pine to rely solely on natural regeneration to restock the stand. In addition, it is difficult to time the harvest to a good seed crop year. For these reasons, the optimal way to ensure successfully restocking the stands to longleaf pine is to clearcut, site prep, and then plant longleaf pine seedlings. The above, also applies to the shortleaf pine stand, where 20 – 30 sq.ft. of basal area will be retained in reserve trees on the site, however artificial regeneration will ensure that this stand is successfully regenerated. In areas of these stands where there is adequate stocking already, then that portion of the stand will not be replanted to either longleaf pine or shortleaf pine.

Public Involvement

As described in the background, there has been an ongoing need for this action. A proposal to restore and improve RCW habitat was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in September 2008. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping from 10/20/2008 to 11/19/2008. A legal notice requesting written comments was also published in the Anniston Star in October 2008. A copy of the scoping notice and maps were also posted at Coleman Lake, Warden Station Horse Camp, and Sweetwater Lake, since all three recreation sites are within the project area. Two written responses were received during scoping and both were in favor of the project. An additional legal notice was published in the Anniston Star in January 2009 to explain the proposed improvements to the Warden Station Horse Camp. No comments were received during this additional scoping period. The EA was also made available to the public on the Forest's Internet site. Record of the comment period is located in the project record. Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.3 (a-e) (2003), since only supportive comments were received during the scoping and comment period this decision is not subject to appeal. A legal notice of the Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact was published in the Anniston Star in July 2009.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions 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. I base my finding on the following:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action.
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety.
3. Within the limited context of the planned actions along with the restrictions and mitigation measures (EA pages 2-3 to 2-6 and Appendix C), there will be no significant effect on any unique characteristics or features of the geographic area. (EA pages 3-1 to 3-21).
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 (see EA pages 3-1 to 3- 21 and Appendix C and E).
5. There are no known effects on the human environment that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. Numerous vegetation management projects of a similar nature have been completed on the Forest such that environmental consequences (see EA pages 3-1 to 3-21 and Appendix E) of this project are well understood.
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because there are no significant effects from the proposed actions and these actions have been carried out in similar projects in recent years.
7. The possible cumulative effects of the proposed actions have been analyzed with consideration for past and reasonably foreseeable future activities on adjacent private and public lands. Each environmental component in Chapter 3 of the EA includes consideration of cumulative effects. The context and intensity of cumulative impacts over space and time will not be significant. (see EA pages 3-1 to 3-21).
8. The proposed actions will not adversely affect any sites listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. This is based on the application method being by individuals and not ground disturbing mechanized equipment.

Implementing this decision will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or result in loss of any other species' viability, or create significant trends toward Federal listing of the species under the ESA. This determination is based on site-specific surveys, the Biological Evaluation for the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Restoration and Improvement Project in the Sweetwater and Coleman Lake Area (Project File), and

concurrence from the USFWS under Section 7(a) (2) of the ESA. (USFWS concurrence in Project File).

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 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

National Forest Management Act

This decision is consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 regarding the effective management, use, and protection of the natural resources of the area affected by this project.

Forest Plan Consistency

I have determined that all actions of the selected alternative will be consistent with the management requirements for the revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama, January 2004.

Implementation Date

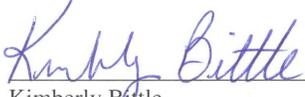
Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.3 (a-e)(2003), as only supportive comments were received during the scoping and comment period this decision is not subject to appeal and can be implemented immediately.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.3 (a-e)(2003), as only supportive comments were received during the scoping and comment period this decision is not subject to appeal.

Contact

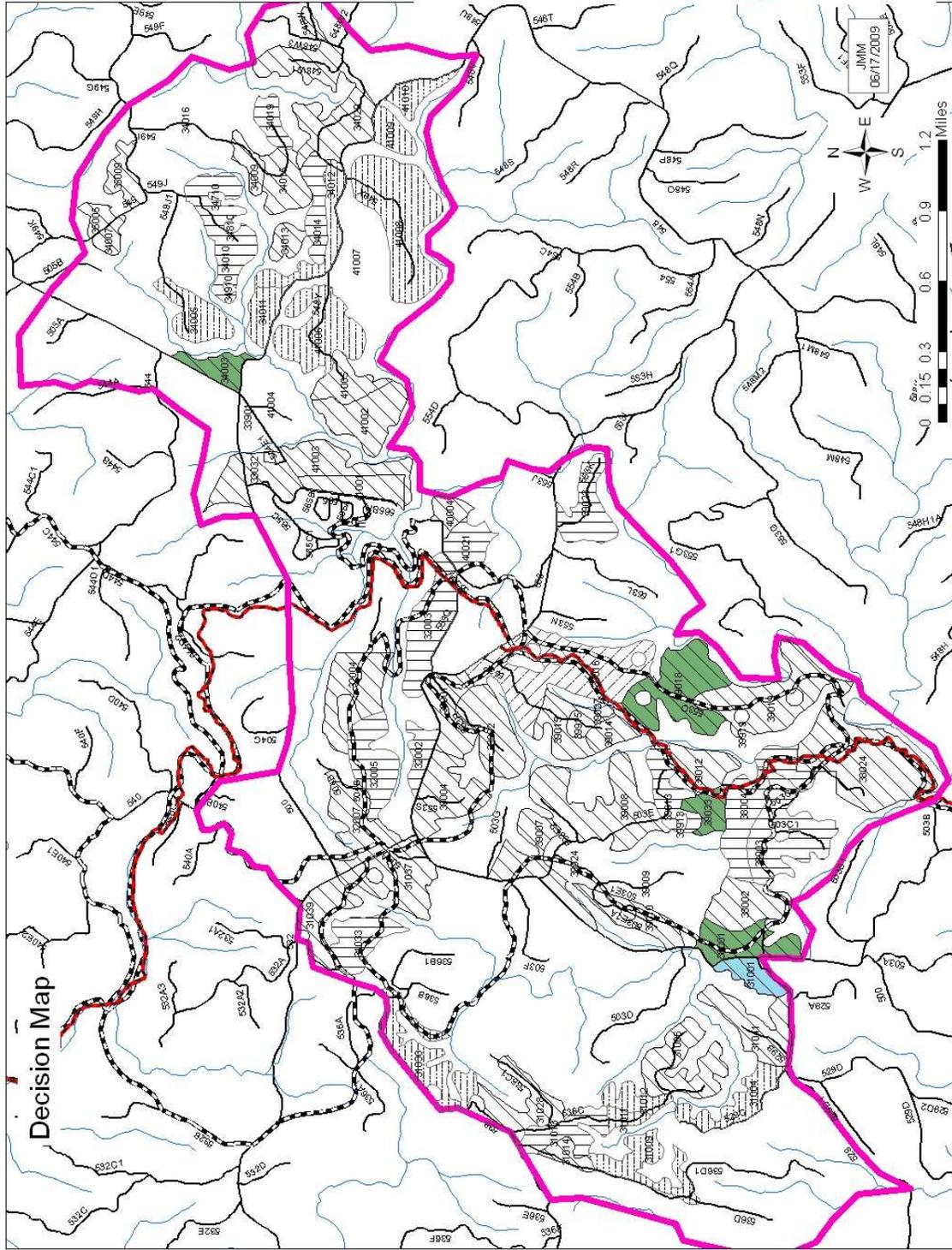
For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Kimberly Bittle, District Ranger, Shoal Creek Ranger District, 45 Hwy 281, Heflin, Alabama 36203, (256) 463-2272.



Kimberly Bittle
District Ranger
Shoal Creek Ranger District



Date



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