

## *Record of Decision*

# Forest Health and Restoration Project

**USDA Forest Service  
Bankhead Ranger District, Bankhead National Forest  
Franklin, Lawrence, and Winston County, State**

## Decision and Reasons for the Decision

### *Background*

The Alabama National Forest (now the northern portion of the Bankhead National Forest) was established in 1914 as a result of the Weeks Act, for the primary purpose of helping to protect the nation's watersheds and streams. During the early years, the emphasis of the Forest Service was land acquisition and custodial responsibilities. Beginning in the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corp provided the labor needed to reestablish forests on abandoned farmland and previously cutover land. The primary species used to reestablish forest conditions was loblolly pine. Beginning in the 1960s, the Forest Service initiated new efforts to improve forest economic production by replacing some upland hardwood forests with faster growing loblolly pine. At the time, loblolly pine offered the best chance of high survival and success in reforestation. There is currently about 79,000 acres typed as loblolly pine on the Bankhead. The Bankhead National Forest is comprised of about 182,000 acres of public lands that can be broadly classified as about 51% southern pines and 49% hardwoods. While loblolly pine is a native tree species, the dominance of pure stands of loblolly pine is not typical of native landscapes of oak forests and fire dependent woodlands that occur in the uplands of the Cumberland Plateau. The occurrence of periodic fire has largely been excluded in the area.

Over the past decade, the Bankhead National Forest experienced Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) infestations at epidemic levels, primarily in loblolly pine forests. The epidemic peaked in the summer of 2000 and continued at very high levels through 2001. An estimated 18,600 acres of pine forest have been killed by this epidemic. Most of the mortality occurred within the Sipsy Wilderness and other special areas where suppression efforts did not take place. The epidemic has resulted in large acres of standing dead trees that are a public safety hazard along trails/roads and these areas have increased forest fuel loads that escalate the risk of catastrophic wildfires in the future.

### *Purpose and Need for the Project*

The purpose of this project is:

- 1) To improve and maintain overall forest health (addresses immediate forest health risks in 15-45 year old loblolly pine forest and long-term forest health).
- 2) To restore native upland hardwood forests and pine-oak woodlands.
- 3) To provide forest communities and plant and animal habitats that are uncommon on other lands in the Southern Cumberland Plateau (establishes a desired

condition that sustains healthy forest communities and wildlife habitats long-term)

This project would emphasize returning these loblolly pine stands and the sites damaged by SPB to native upland forest community types and would set the stage for attaining the long term desired future conditions (DFC) for the forest. A description of these forest communities can be found in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) Appendix. The native upland forest community types are:

- 1) Dry-Mesic Oak Forests
- 2) Dry and Dry-Mesic Oak-Pine Forests
- 3) Dry and Xeric Oak Forests and Woodlands
- 4) Xeric Pine-Oak Forests and Woodlands
- 5) Xeric Shortleaf Pine/Bluestem Woodlands
- 6) Upland Longleaf Pine/Bluestem Woodlands

The original proposed action (Alternative 2) is needed because overstocking in loblolly pine stands has created unhealthy stand conditions that resulted in the risk for future SPB epidemic on the District. This situation has created the following concerns:

- Heavy fuel loading across the District, which increases the potential for catastrophic wildfires.
- Approximately 7,382 acres of SPB damaged areas that need to be restored.
- Approximately 18,143 acres of loblolly pine stands between the age of 15 and 45 years old with a potential need for thinning to reduce SPB risk.

The final environmental impact statement (FEIS) documents the analysis of six alternatives to meet this need.

### *Decision*

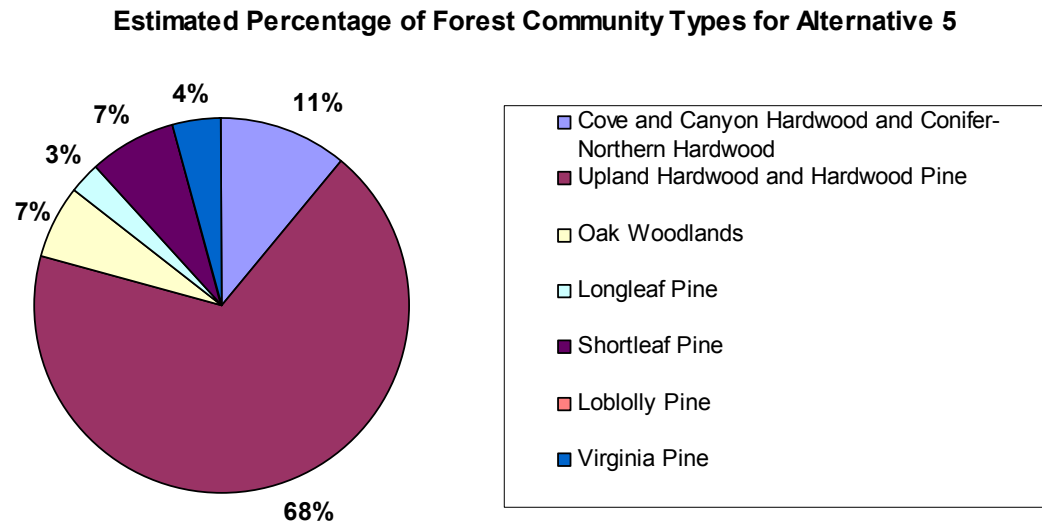
Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement Alternative 5. This alternative establishes the desired future conditions (DFC) of all existing loblolly pine stands on the Bankhead and implements a five-year schedule of priority work to emphasize forest health and restoration by thinning overstocked loblolly pine stands and reforesting SPB damaged stands. Emphasis will be placed on the restoration of six native upland forest community types, including all associated plant and wildlife species, on the Bankhead National Forest.

My decision over the next 5 years will focus on:

- Intermediate commercial thinning on 9,452 acres of loblolly pine stands that are between the ages of 15 and 45 years old.
- Silvicultural site preparation of SPB impacted areas that are 10 acres and larger to better insure successful reforestation efforts.
- Natural and artificial reforestation to restore SPB impacted areas on approximately 6,860 acres.

The proposed action addresses the need to improve and maintain healthy forest conditions; to provide the full range of forest communities and plant and animal habitats uncommon on other lands that are native to the Southern Cumberland Plateau; and to provide additional early successional habitat (grass/forb and shrub/seedling/sapling associations) for wildlife in the Black Warrior Management Area.

Alternative 5 identifies the long-term desired conditions that will take several decades to achieve. Existing loblolly pine plantations will not be replaced immediately, but gradually overtime. I expect to achieve woodland conditions, along with the diverse plant understory in the short-term. Loblolly pine will not be eliminated, but will continue to be a common species within some of the native forest communities identified. The following chart depicts the long-term DFC for forest communities for the entire Bankhead National Forest:



Alternative 5 differs from the original proposed action (Alternative 2) because:

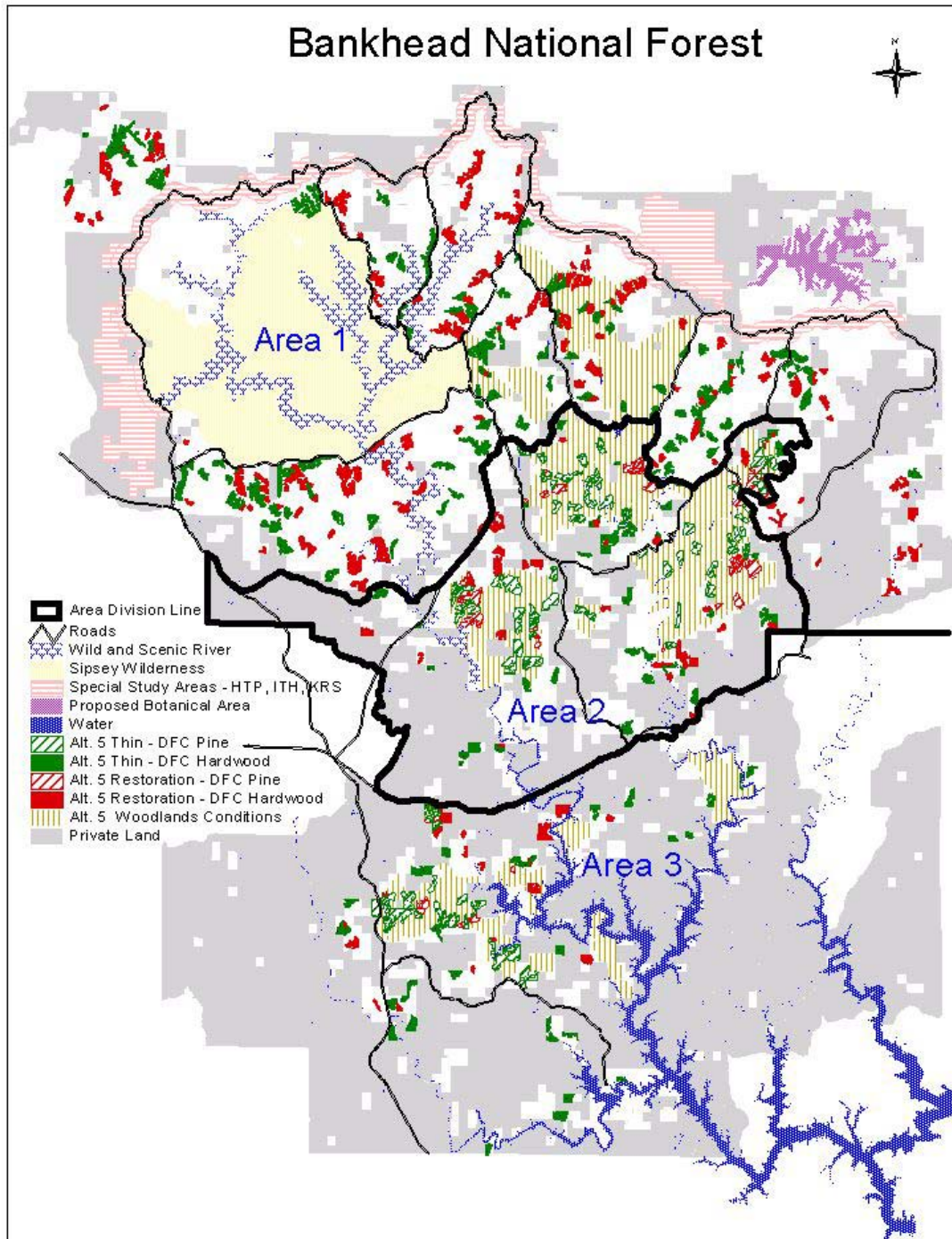
- No intermediate thinning is located in the proposed Flint Creek Botanical Area;
- No intermediate thinning is located in the cultural heritage areas (High Town Path, Indian Tomb Hollow, and Kinlock Springs);
- Several of the original thinning sites dropped after field inventory determined thinning was not warranted at this time.
- Additional needs for providing a distribution of grass/shrub habitats identified.

There was a change from draft to final in the acres of shortleaf pine to be planted due to an error in the Table 2A. The acres should be 1,023 instead of 772. The 772 acres applies to hardwood restoration in Area 2. The correct acres were applied to the effects analysis for the alternatives.

A complete listing of the areas proposed for treatment and the treatment proposed for each is located in the FEIS Appendix on pages 222-227.

Alternative 5 describes the desired future conditions (DFC) by dividing the forest into three separate geographic areas (figure 1).

**Figure 1. Alternative 5 map of the Bankhead National Forest showing five year priority work and areas for desired future conditions.**

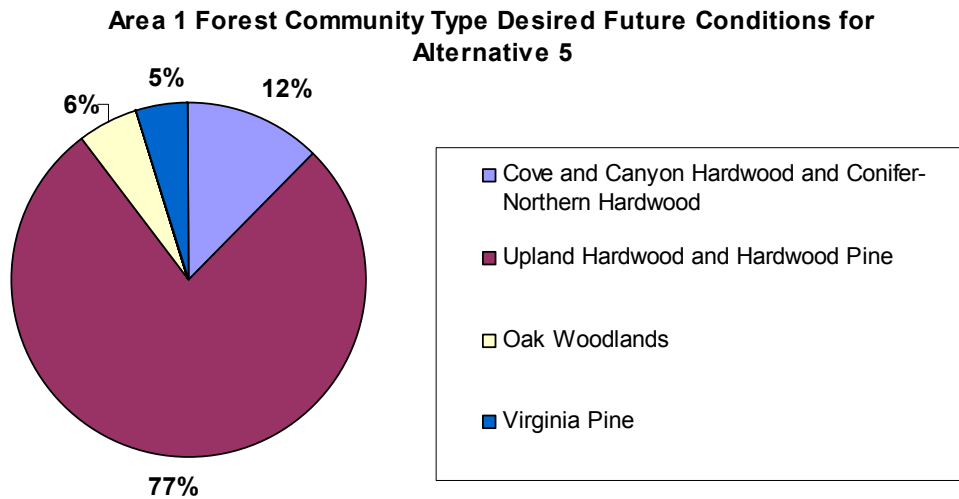


The following is a description of DFC's and treatments by area:

### Area 1

#### *Desired Future Condition*

Area 1 totals 124,342 acres across the northern portion of the Bankhead Ranger District (see FEIS figure 5, page 40). The expected desired condition for this area is shown below in the following chart.



The currently existing loblolly pine stands would be restored over several decades to one of the following community type:

- Dry-Mesic Oak Forests
- Dry and Dry-Mesic Oak-Pine Forests
- Dry and Xeric Oak Forests and Woodlands

The dry and xeric (very dry) oak and oak-pine forests and woodlands would be primarily mid- to late-successional forests. These forests are characterized as having canopies ranging from closed forest conditions to open woodland conditions, with occasional small gaps up to 1 acre in size. Dominant overstory trees would include white oak, black oak, chestnut oak, scarlet oak, and post oak. The occurrence of prescribed fire in these areas, 1 or 2 times per decade would not inhibit a well-developed shrub and mid-story canopy over most of this area. On a designated 8,115 acres (see Figure 5) the occurrence of prescribed fire 2 or 3 times per decade, would restrict tree density and promote the growth of shade intolerant grasses, forbs, and shrubs and create an oak woodlands community type.

The mesic (moderately moist) oak and oak-pine forests would be primarily mid- to late-successional forests. These forests would have a continuous dominant canopy of medium-sized trees, with occasional small gaps up to one acre in size. Dominant

overstory trees would include sugar maple, beech, chestnut oak, black oak, scarlet oak, pignut hickory, mockernut hickory, shagbark hickory, loblolly pine, shortleaf pine, and Virginia pine. American chestnut historically was a major species in this forest community and may be restored in the future. These sites typically have a well-developed shrub and mid-story canopy.

An additional goal in Area 1 would be to provide early successional habitat, well distributed, on up to 10 percent of the area. This goal could be met by:

- Providing woodland areas on 8,115 acres identified (FEIS page 40)
- Creating additional woodland acres on other sites not yet identified
- Establishing wildlife openings
- Creating canopy gap openings
- Establishing of areas less than 10 acres in size to provide for early successional habitat
- Existing power line rights of way

#### *Five-Year Priority Treatments*

- Intermediate thinning of approximately 4,092 acres of loblolly pine forest to reduce basal area to between 55 to 70 square feet per acre. Trees favored for retention in order of priority in these areas are:
  - dominant hardwood trees
  - codominant hardwood trees
  - dominant/codominant pine

The favored hardwood species would include a variety of oak and hickory species. The thinning would allow for the development of young oak, hickory, and other associated hardwood species in the understory that are somewhat intolerant of shade. This thinning would be the first phase of a long-term commitment (30-90 years) that would gradually replace these existing loblolly pine stands with dry and xeric oak forests, or dry-mesic oak and oak-pine forests. In some cases, this thinning would actually shift the stand condition from a predominantly pine stand to a predominately hardwood stand condition. It is anticipated that these thinning sales will be open to all conventional logging methods, however, opportunities to accomplish some thinning with newly developed cut-to-length harvesting methods will be explored.

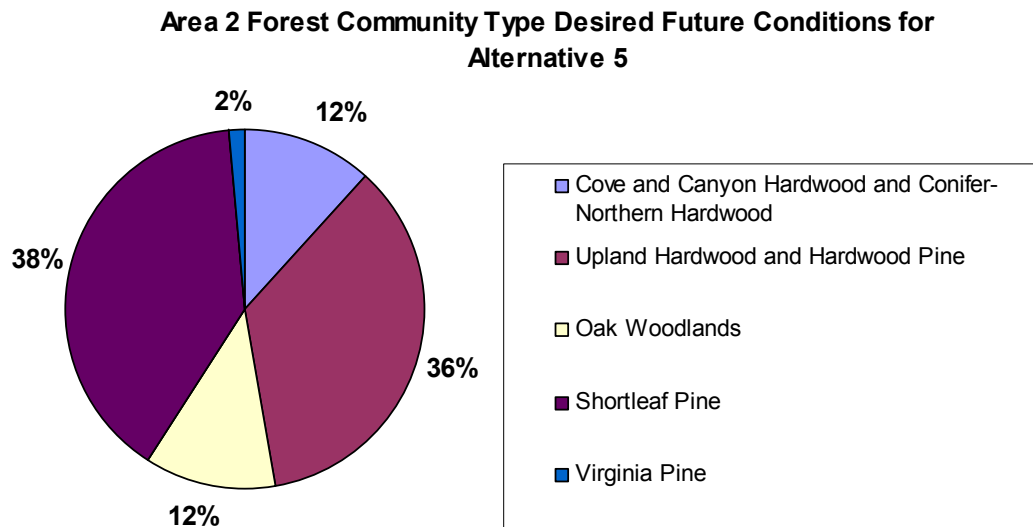
- Natural reforestation of upland hardwood and associated site preparation on approximately 4,354 acres of areas impacted by SPB and may include:
  - site preparation with hand tools
  - prescribed burning
  - combination of both
  - left to regenerate naturally without site preparation.

Site preparation for natural regeneration on restoration sites would consist of hand tools and prescribed fire, hand tools alone, prescribed fire alone, or no treatment. These treatments would be used to restore these sites to dry and xeric oak forests, or dry-mesic oak and oak-pine forests.

**Area 2**

*Desired Future Condition*

Area 2 totals 34,151 acres across the central portion of the Bankhead Ranger District (see FEIS figure 5, page 40). The expected desired condition for this area is shown below in the following chart.



The currently existing loblolly pine stands would be restored over time to one of the following communities:

- Dry-Mesic Oak Forests
- Dry and Dry-Mesic Oak-Pine Forests
- Dry and Xeric Oak Forests and Woodlands (1,995 acres)
- Xeric Pine-Oak Forests and Woodlands (shortleaf/bluestem woodlands) (3,194 acres)

The dry and xeric (very dry) oak and oak-pine forests and woodlands would be primarily mid- to late-successional forests. These forests are characterized as having canopies ranging from closed forest conditions to open woodland conditions, with occasional small gaps up to ½ acre in size. Dominant overstory trees would include white oak, black oak, chestnut oak, scarlet oak, and post oak. The frequent occurrence of prescribed fire over much of this area, 2 or 3 times per decade would restrict tree density and promote the growth of shade intolerant grasses, forbs, and shrubs in some areas. In other portions of area 2, forests would have a well developed shrub and mid-story canopy.

The mesic (moderately moist) oak and oak-pine forests would be primarily mid- to late-successional forests. These forests would have a continuous dominant canopy of medium-sized trees, with occasional small gaps up to ½ acre in size. Dominant overstory trees would include sugar maple, beech, chestnut oak, black oak, scarlet oak, pignut hickory, mockernut hickory, shagbark hickory, and loblolly pine, shortleaf pine, and Virginia pine. American chestnut historically was a major species in this forest community. These sites would have a well-developed shrub and mid-story canopy.

The shortleaf/bluestem woodlands would be primarily mid- to late-successional forests. These forests are characterized as having open woodland conditions, with occasional small gaps up to ½ acre in size. The dominant overstory tree would be shortleaf pine. Other trees species that would be found at lower densities are: Virginia pine, loblolly pine, scarlet oak, chestnut oak, southern red oak, white oak, blackjack oak, and pignut hickory. The occurrence of prescribed fire in these areas, 2 or 3 times per decade would restrict tree density and promote the growth of shade intolerant native grasses, forbs, and shrubs.

#### *Five-Year Priority Treatments*

- Intermediate thinning of approximately 2,422 acres of loblolly pine forest to reduce basal area to between 55 to 70 square feet per acre. Trees favored for retention in order of priority in these areas are:
  - dominant/codominant shortleaf pine
  - dominant/codominant longleaf pine
  - dominant/codominant loblolly pine
  - dominant/codominant oaks and hickory
- Intermediate thinning of approximately 972 acres of loblolly pine forest to reduce basal area to between 55 to 70 square feet per acre. Trees favored for retention in order of priority in these areas are:
  - dominant hardwood trees
  - codominant hardwood trees
  - dominant/codominant pine

It is proposed that all timber sale harvest options would be available for this project. The thinning would allow for the development of understory species that will be determined based upon burning regimes. It is anticipated that these thinning sales will be open to all conventional logging methods, however, opportunities to accomplish some thinning with newly developed harvesting methods will be explored.

- Artificial reforestation of shortleaf pine and associated site preparation on approximately 1,023 acres of areas impacted by SPB and may include:
  - site preparation by roller drum chopping or new methods that may be developed
  - prescribed fire
  - combination of both



- planting with shortleaf pine seedlings
- Natural reforestation of upland hardwood and associated site preparation on approximately 772 acres of areas impacted by SPB and may include:
  - site preparation with hand tools
  - prescribed burning
  - combination of both
  - left to regenerate naturally without site preparation.

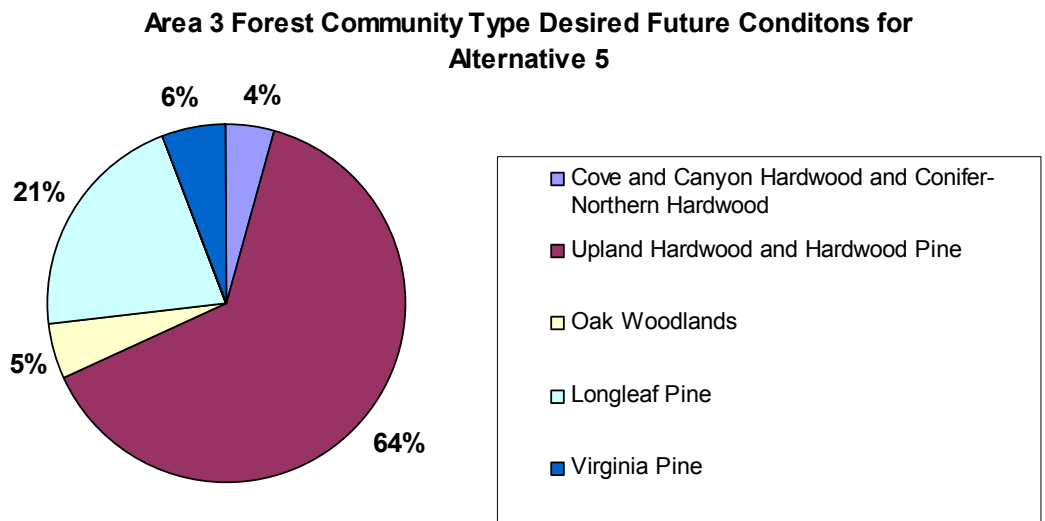
Site preparation on restoration sites with DFC of shortleaf pine would consist of roller drum chopping and prescribed fire, followed by the planting of shortleaf pine seedlings. Site preparation on restoration sites with DFC of hardwood would consist of hand tools and prescribed fire, hand tools alone, prescribed fire alone, or no treatment. These treatments would begin the process of restoring these sites to the selected DFC.

It is anticipated that prescribed fire would occur on parts of this area 2 or 3 times per decade to reduce forest fuel build up, create open woodland conditions, and enhance wildlife habitat. Maintenance of existing wildlife openings (1 to 5 acres in size) would provide additional early succession type habitat. Other projects could be under taken to provide more early successional type habitat (i.e. construction of new wildlife openings 1 to 5 acres in size).

**Area 3**

*Desired Future Condition*

Area 3 totals 23,221 acres across the southern portion of the Bankhead Ranger District (see FEIS figure 5, page 40). The expected desired condition for this area is shown below in the following chart.



The currently existing loblolly pine stands would be restored over time to one of the following communities:

- Dry-Mesic Oak Forests
- Dry and Dry-Mesic Oak-Pine Forests
- Dry and Xeric Oak Forests and Woodlands (1,484 acres)
- Xeric Pine-Oak Forests and Woodlands
- Upland Longleaf Pine/Bluestem Woodlands (1,193 acres)

The dry and xeric (very dry) oak and oak-pine forests and woodlands would be primarily mid- to late-successional forests. These forests are characterized as having canopies ranging from closed forest conditions to open woodland conditions, with occasional small gaps up to ½ acre in size. Dominant overstory trees would include white oak, black oak, chestnut oak, scarlet oak, and post oak. The occurrence of prescribed fire in these areas, 2 or 3 times per decade would restrict tree density and promote the growth of shade intolerant grasses, forbs, and shrubs in some areas and in other areas these forests would have a well developed shrub and mid-story canopy.

The mesic (moderately moist) oak and oak-pine forests would be primarily mid- to late-successional forests. These forests would have a continuous dominant canopy of medium-sized trees, with occasional small gaps up to ½ acre in size. Dominant overstory trees would include sugar maple, beech, chestnut oak, black oak, scarlet oak, pignut hickory, mockernut hickory, shagbark hickory, loblolly pine, shortleaf pine, and Virginia pine. American chestnut historically was a major species in this forest community. These sites would have a well-developed shrub and mid-story canopy.

The longleaf/bluestem woodlands would be primarily mid- to late-successional forests. These forests are characterized as having open woodland conditions, with occasional small gaps up to ½ acre in size. The dominant overstory tree would be longleaf pine. Other trees species that would be found at lower densities are: Virginia pine, loblolly pine, scarlet oak, chestnut oak, southern red oak, white oak, blackjack oak, and pignut hickory. The occurrence of prescribed fire in these areas, 2 or 3 times per decade would restrict tree density and promote the growth of shade intolerant native grasses, forbs, and shrubs.

#### *Five-Year Priority Treatments*

- Intermediate thinning of approximately 1,025 acres of loblolly pine forest to reduce basal area to between 55 to 70 square feet per acre. Trees favored for retention in order of priority in these areas are:
  - dominant/codominant longleaf pine
  - dominant/codominant shortleaf pine
  - dominant/codominant loblolly pine
  - dominant/codominant oaks and hickory
- Intermediate thinning of approximately 941 acres of loblolly pine forest to reduce basal area to between 55 to 70 square feet per acre. Trees favored for retention in order of priority in these areas are:

- dominant hardwood trees
- codominant hardwood trees
- dominant/codominant pine

It is proposed that all timber sale harvest options would be available for this project. The thinning would allow for the development of understory species that are intolerant of shade. This thinning would be the first phase of a long-term commitment that would gradually replace these existing loblolly pine stands with one of the following community types:

- Longleaf pine as the predominant overstory species, and bluestem grass association as the predominant understory.
- Dry and xeric oak forests and woodlands, or dry-mesic oak and oak-pine forests.

The thinning sales will be open to all conventional logging methods. Opportunities to accomplish some thinning with newly developed harvesting methods will be explored.

- Artificial reforestation of longleaf pine and associated site preparation on approximately 168 acres of areas impacted by SPB and may include:
  - site preparation by roller drum chopping or new methods that may be developed
  - prescribed fire
  - combination of both
  - planting with longleaf pine seedlings
- Natural reforestation of upland hardwood and associated site preparation on approximately 543 acres of areas impacted by SPB and may include:
  - site preparation with hand tools
  - prescribed burning
  - combination of both
  - left to regenerate naturally without site preparation.

Site preparation on restoration sites with DFC of longleaf pine would consist of roller drum chopping and prescribed fire, followed by the planting of longleaf pine seedlings. Site preparation on restoration sites with DFC of hardwood would consist of hand tools and prescribed fire, hand tools alone, prescribed fire alone, or no treatment. These treatments would begin the process of restoring these sites to the selected DFC.

It is anticipated that prescribed fire would occur on parts of this area 2 or 3 times per decade to reduce forest fuel build up, create open woodland conditions, and enhance wildlife habitat. Maintenance of existing wildlife openings (1 to 5 acres in size) would provide additional early succession type habitat. Other projects could be under taken to provide more early successional type habitat (i.e. construction of new wildlife openings 1 to 5 acres in size).

## *Mitigations*

State approved best management practices (BMP) will be met or exceeded. In accordance with the State Water Quality Management Plan, BMP's for silvicultural practices are designed to protect water quality needs for designated beneficial uses. Management actions in compliance with these BMP's will insure compliance with the Clean Water Act. Mitigating measures called for the Final Environmental Impact Statement, Vegetation Management in the Appalachian Mountains (VM EIS), and the Standards and Guidelines in the LRMP, Chapter IV, pages IV-106 to IV-112 will be followed. A list all additional project mitigation measures for Alternative 5 can be found on pages 48-51 in the forest health and restoration FEIS.

## *The Reasons for Selecting Alternative 5*

**Meets the Purpose and Need.** I selected Alternative 5 because I feel this alternative best meets the purpose and need for this project. This alternative will reduce the forest health risks from future SPB infestations, begins significant restoration of upland hardwood forest communities, provides the most acres and best distribution of important, fire-dependent woodland communities that are very uncommon in the southern Cumberland Plateau. The analysis in the FEIS shows that Alternative 5 will have the most overall benefit to terrestrial plants and animals across the landscape due to the variety of forest community types and the amount of disturbance created through prescribed burning associated with woodland conditions. While I feel Alternatives 2, 3, and 6 would also meet the purpose and need, these alternatives are not as beneficial to terrestrial plants and animals long-term. I feel that Alternative 1 and Alternative 4 do not meet purpose and need because forest health needs are not met with Alternative 1 and Alternative 4 does not provide for all native forest community types and habitat conditions.

**Environmentally Preferred Alternative.** Alternative 5 is the most environmentally preferred. There is no significant impact to the 11 watersheds containing national forest system land. All watersheds are in excellent condition and will remain as such. Alternative 5, along with 3, 4, and 6 show the least potential impact to these watersheds. Streams and associated riparian forests will continue to provide quality habitats for all associated threatened, endangered, and sensitive species native to the area. Future old-growth forests will not be affected by Alternative 5, along with the other alternatives. Alternative 5 provides the highest diversity and distribution of native upland forest and woodland habitats compared to the other alternatives.

**Consideration of Ecosystem and Biological Needs.** I considered information developed for the Southern Cumberland Plateau physiographic area in reviewing the analysis for the different alternatives. I feel Alternative 5 provides the best representation and distribution of important habitat conditions identified by other broad scale assessments and that will not be provided on other lands. Alternative 5 best provides for significant upland, fire-dependent woodland conditions that are rare in this physiographic area. These woodland conditions, while significant, will be provided for on less than 20% of the total acreage within the Bankhead. At the same time, Alternative 5 provides for extensive acres of mid- to late-successional deciduous forests important to many terrestrial plants and animals, including all high priority migratory and resident forest birds associated with these habitats. Aquatic and associated riparian forests (cove-eastern hemlock forests) will remain in excellent condition. Surveys were conducted to

identify local occurrences of species associated with areas proposed for treatments. Species occurrences will be protected for activities that would negatively impact them. This information is provided in stand treatment prescriptions used in preparing areas for thinning or site preparation. Also rare community types, such as glades, rock outcrops, and cliffs will be protected. The Bankhead National Forest will be a source of premium habitats for all native plant and animal species.

**Compliance with Laws and Regulations.** Alternative 5 is in compliance with all associated laws, regulations, and Forest Service policy. This is discussed in the later section.

**Consideration of Social and Economic Factors.** Alternative 5 addresses reducing forest health risks that will result in the highest diversity of visual settings for forest visitors. Alternative 5 rates best for increasing quality experience for dispersed recreation. Alternative 5 provides the best distribution of suitable/optimal habitat for white-tailed deer and eastern wild turkey. Habitat for bobwhite quail, a species in decline over much of the southeast, will be greatly enhanced by Alternative 5. The quality of hunting experiences for big game and small game hunters rates as best relative to the other alternatives.

The utilization of commercial timber sales on 9,452 acres will result in 75 million cubic feet of timber products totaling approximately \$1.9 million. These projects will benefit the local economy.

**Response to Public Issues.** The FEIS and the Response to Comments section details how issues raised by the public were addressed. I will focus here on significant (as defined by NEPA) issues and late issues that arose late in our public comment period.

Issue 1. Establish and maintain fire dependent understory species in oak woodland, longleaf woodland, and shortleaf woodland ecosystems. The desired conditions for these forests were addressed at various levels for the alternatives. Alternative 4 provides the least amount and distribution of this condition, while Alternative 5 has the best distribution of this condition. Alternative 5 best addresses the desire to represent this rare condition on the Bankhead.

Issue 2. Amount of artificial regeneration. In order to restore the shortleaf and longleaf woodland communities, the planting of these species will be required because natural seed sources for these species are not present. Alternative 4 was developed to represent the least amount of artificial regeneration. However, Alternative 4 did not result in desirable outcomes for quality wildlife habitat or for meeting the purpose and need for this project.

Issue 3. Impacts on recreational experiences and cultural values. Alternative 5 addresses reducing forest health risks that will result in the highest diversity of visual settings for forest visitors. Alternative 5 rates best for increasing quality experience for dispersed recreation and hunting opportunities.

Alternative 5, as well as all other alternatives, will comply with Sections 106 and 110 of the Heritage Preservation Act of 1966 as amended in 1980. No timber harvest treatments are included within proposed cultural heritage areas, now under a 1996 moratorium for ground disturbance. The detailed analysis of cultural resources is found in section 3.9 of the FEIS.

Issue 4. Impacts from Annosum Root Rot and Little Leaf Disease. All high risk sites for annosum root rot are identified. On these high risk sites, this disease will be mitigated by thinning within summer months or by treating cut stumps with borax. Analysis for littleleaf disease indicates most of the Bankhead's soil types do not fall into risk categories for this disease. Where shortleaf pine restoration is planned, a wider planting spacing is beneficial. Consultation with our Forest Health Pathology staff will continue.

Issue 5. Early successional habitat dispersed throughout the district. Alternative 5 best addresses this issue by providing for best distribution of fire, dependent woodland conditions and for additional habitat conditions in the desired future condition statements in Area 1 and within the Black Warrior Management Area.

This project will result the loss of residents private property to the government or result in government regulation of private property around the Bankhead National Forest. The decision associated with this project, or any other decision related to the Bankhead, will not result in people losing their property to the Forest Service, the right of people to management their property according to their personal objectives, or in people's ability to pass their property on to their relatives or anyone else they may desire.

This project will result in negative economic impacts to Winston County. The analysis shows that commercial timber harvests and increased recreational use will generate income for local economies. The implementation of Alternative 5 will provide a significant increase in economic benefits to Winston, Lawrence, and Franklin Counties, when compared to the past decade. Timber sales related to this project will average 8.6 million board feet annually over five years, while the Bankhead averaged less than 4 million board feet annually in the proceeding 10 years.

There was not adequate opportunity for the public to be involved and to provide their input. Public involvement and scoping for this project has been ongoing since May 2000. The district held several public meetings in both Double Springs and Moulton on the forest health project. Mailings of a prescoping brochure that explained the project, scoping documents, Notice of Availability of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), and newspaper announcements also took place. Our mailings went to over 200 people on our mailing list, included many forest residents and affected county commissioners. In addition, I hosted a meeting with all those who commented on the DEIS to provide an overview of the forest health and restoration project to provide people with a better understanding of the project and to listen to concerns. I met with most of the elected officials in the area who provided concerns about the project they had heard from some citizens opposed to the project. Any individual who wanted to be involved in this process has ample opportunity to ask questions and present their concerns on this project.

### ***Monitoring***

Monitoring of the activities in this project will occur in a variety of ways. A certified timber sale administrator will monitor timber sale operations. A reforestation technician and/or silviculturist will monitor site preparation and planting. The district biologist and timber sale administrator will monitor stream zone protection, snag retention, compliance with bat guidelines, and erosion control measures.

Actions implemented in the project area will be monitored for compliance of Forest Standards and Guidelines (BMP's) in accordance with the LRMP. Effectiveness monitoring will be accomplished in accordance with the methodology outlined in Soil Monitoring of Logging Operations and Site Preparation Burns on National Forests in Alabama plan. This project will also be included in the Soil and Water standard and Guidelines Monitoring Plan, developed by the Forest Hydrologist, to monitor the compliance and effectiveness of Standards and Guidelines.

Monitoring of stream habitat conditions will be conducted in concert with ADEM stream health IBI standards; compliance will be determined by ensuring that the current IBI ratings are maintained or improved. The district's wildlife biologist and technicians will participate in periodic ground surveys and status updates via current literature and research to ensure that management activities in place on the Bankhead do not create viability concerns.

Monitoring of terrestrial wildlife and plant resources will be conducted by project specific surveys and will document the occurrence and or presence of species documented above on a case-by-case basis. Species listed in the species of concern (Table 3.5.2.A) that are known to be present from surveys for this project will be identified and monitored through the project implementation. Game/Harvest data collected from the Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area will be used to address the trends for some of the MIS. Bat trapping and cave monitoring will be used to determine long-term effects on the bat population of the Bankhead N.F. Bird point count surveys will continue to be conducted on a yearly basis during the spring in accordance with Partners in Flight (PIF) standards. This data will be collected and added to the database maintained on the regional level in order to discern trends in bird populations. Long term land cover and vegetation understory will be monitored through photo-points used to identify cumulative changes induced by prescribed burning.

Monitoring for "Compliance with (the Clean Air Act) State Implementation Plan and internal Forest Service provisions for smoke management" is described as Task # 34 in Appendix F of the DRLRMP. That information, including methods of data collection, is included here by reference. Specific "Appendix F" information for the monitoring described in the preceding paragraphs is: schedule = annual, in April; reporting = annual; precision = high; reliability = high; responsibility = Bankhead staff and Zone air quality specialist.

Monitoring of visual impacts will be accomplished by the Forest Landscape Architect in the following situations:

- 1) All vegetative management activities before, during, and after their occurrence in Sipsey River corridor.
- 2) All vegetative management activities before, during, and after their occurrence in developed recreation sites.
- 3) At least once on a typical restoration activity before, during, and after their occurrence in a roadside retention and partial retention area.
- 4) At least once on a typical thinning activity before, during, and after their occurrence in a roadside retention and partial retention area.

- 5) At least once a typical vegetative management activity before, during, and after its occurrence along the Owl Creek Trail System.

Historic properties that are potentially eligible, eligible, or listed on the NRHP will be flagged for avoidance as part of the archaeological survey process. A Forest Service contract inspector or sale administrator will monitor these sites to insure that no damage occurs during treatment activities. Historic properties are vulnerable to damage by looting or vandalism and by natural disasters such as floods or tornadoes. Forest Service archaeologists, in conjunction with law enforcement, should systematically monitor potentially eligible, eligible, and listed NRHP historic properties according to an established monitoring plan that takes into account factors such as degree of vulnerability and relative significance.

### *Other Alternatives Considered*

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered five other alternatives, which are discussed below. Alternative 5 was the environmentally preferred alternative. A more detailed comparison of these alternatives can be found in the FEIS.

#### Alternative 1 (No Action)

Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. The No Action Alternative makes no DFC decisions and takes no action to thin the loblolly stands or restore the SPB areas.

#### Alternative 2 - (Proposed Action)

Thin approximately 18,143 acres and restore approximately 7,382 acres of SPB areas.

- Area 1 - DFC of loblolly pine stands would be dry and xeric oak forests, dry-mesic oak, or dry and dry-mesic oak-pine forests.
- Area 2 - DFC of loblolly pine stands would be xeric shortleaf pine/bluestem or xeric pine-oak forests and woodlands.
- Area 3 - DFC of loblolly pine stands would be upland longleaf pine/bluestem or xeric pine-oak forests and woodlands.

#### Alternative 3

Thin approximately 9,452 acres and restore approximately 6,860 acres of SPB areas.

- Area 1 - DFC of loblolly pine stands would be dry and xeric oak forests, dry-mesic oak, or dry and dry-mesic oak-pine forests.
- Area 2 - DFC of loblolly pine stands would be xeric shortleaf pine/bluestem or xeric pine-oak forests and woodlands (treatment on 3,194 acres) and dry and xeric oak forests and woodlands, dry-mesic oak, or dry and dry-mesic oak-pine forests (treatment on 1,995 acres).
- Area 3 - DFC of loblolly pine stands would be upland longleaf pine/bluestem (treatment on 1,193 acres) or xeric pine-oak forests and woodlands (treatment on 1,484 acres).



#### Alternative 4

Same treatments as Alternative 3 except DFC for loblolly pine stands in Area 2 would be dry and xeric oak forest, dry-mesic oak, or dry and dry-mesic oak-pine forests (shortleaf/bluestem would not be the DFC).

#### Alternative 6

Same treatments as Alternative 3 except all treatments would be accomplished by contract and commercial timber sales would be used only to remove merchantable materials after the treatment contracts are completed.

#### *Public Involvement*

As described in the background, the need for this action arose in 2000. A proposal to thin approximately 18,143 acres and restore approximately 7,382 acres of SPB areas was listed in the Notice of Intent on May 24, 2002. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping May 25 through July 6, 2002. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency conducted the following activities to involve and inform the public:

- 1) Initial public involvement began at the quarterly public meetings the district holds with discussions about the need to treat the existing loblolly pine stands on the district to improve and maintain the health of these stands. These discussions continue to be a part of these regular public meetings. These meetings continued with focused monthly meetings occurring between November 2002 and May 2003.
- 2) This project was included in the Bankhead National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) for scoping in the spring of 2002. These updates are mailed to the Bankhead National Forest's mailing list.
- 3) In the spring of 2002, a brochure entitled "Bankhead National Forest: Forest Health and Restoration Project" was distributed to the Bankhead National Forest's mailing list and to other interested individuals. This brochure explained the need for action and asked for input to the process.
- 4) The Notice of Intent (NOI) was published in the federal register on May 24, 2002. In addition, letters were sent to the Bankhead National Forest's mailing list and information regarding the NOI was published in the Northwest Alabamian on May 25, 2002. Public comment period for the proposal ran from May 24 through July 6, 2002.

Complete scoping documentation is located in the project file at the Bankhead District Ranger Station in Double Springs.

Using the comments from the public, other agencies, and Bankhead Liaison Panel, the interdisciplinary team identified several issues regarding the effects of the proposed action. Main issues of concern included:

- 1) Establishment and maintenance of fire dependent understory species in oak woodland, longleaf woodland, and shortleaf woodland ecosystems.
- 2) Adversity of some publics to artificial regeneration.
- 3) Impacts on recreational experiences and cultural values on the district.

- 4) Impacts from Annosum Root Rot (ARR) and Littleleaf Disease (LLD).
- 5) Early successional habitat (grass/forb and shrub/seedling/sapling associations) dispersed throughout the district.

To address these concerns, the Forest Service developed the six alternatives (discussed in previous section) to address the issues raised by the public.

The DEIS was available for review on 45 days ending on August 25, 2003. Toward the end of this comment period concerns were raised concerning property rights, economic impacts to the area, and lack of opportunity for public to be involved. In response to these late concerns that were raised, I met with many of the local elected officials, including mayors to provide an overview of the project and to address concerns. I also held a meeting on August 28, 2003 for all persons who commented on the DEIS to again provide an overview of the project and listen to concerns people had. About 50 persons attended that meeting. I attended another meeting on September 6, 2003 hosted by the Free State of Winston Natural Resources Committee to listen and address concerns raised by persons attending.

#### *Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations*

- 1) The action is consistent with management direction, including goals, objectives, and standards and guidelines in the National Forests in Alabama Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, including all amendments. The action also considers information being developed as part of the Draft Revision of the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. The most demanding standards for protecting natural resources, from the current forest plan or the draft forest plan revision, were applied in this project. In implementing the Forest Plan, the actions in this project comply with all seven management requirements found in implementing regulations for the National Forest Management Act (36 CFR 219.27). This includes meeting all 7 requirements for vegetation manipulations (36 CFR 219.27(b)), and the diversity requirements (36 CFR 219.27(g)).
- 2) The project meets the procedural requirements of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Biological Assessment prepared for this project and concurrence from the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service found that species listed as federally listed threatened or endangered would not be adversely affected. The project also meets the spirit of the ESA, in that as a federal land manager, priority is being given to providing high quality native terrestrial and aquatic habitats that will contribute to the protection and recovery of Federally listed species.
- 3) The proposal is consistent with other major federal laws, which includes the Clean Water Act and the National Historic Preservation Act and Executive Order 11593.

## Implementation

### *Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities*

This decision is subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR 215.11(a) All persons who submitted substantive comments during the comment period may appeal. A notice of appeal must be in writing and clearly state that it is a Notice of Appeal being filed in

pursuant to 36 CFR 215.14. A written appeal, including attachments, must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer within 45 days of the date of the legal notice of this decision in the *Northwest Alabamian*.

The appeal shall be sent to National Forest's in Alabama, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer 2946 Chestnut Street, Montgomery, Alabama, 36107; or (2) faxed to (334)241-8111; or (3) emailed to *appeals-southern-alabama@fs.fed.us*. Hand-delivered appeals must be received within the Forest Supervisor's normal business hours of 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

***Implementation Date***

If no appeal is received sooner than 45 days from the date of the legal notice of this decision in the *Northwest Alabamian*, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 business days following the date of the appeal disposition (36 CFR 215.9).

***Contact Person***

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Glen D. Gaines, District Ranger, or John W. Creed, EIS Team Leader, PO Box 278, Double Springs, AL 35553, telephone 205-489-5111.

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**GLEN D. GAINES**  
**District Ranger**  
**Bankhead Ranger District**

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**DATE**