

DECISION MEMO

Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project Wildlife Opening Construction, Rehabilitation and Expansion FY 2007 - 2013

USDA Forest Service
Bankhead National Forest - National Forests in Alabama
Winston and Lawrence Counties, Alabama

Decision

I have decided to conduct a wildlife habitat improvement project on approximately 62.5 acres. Twenty-two areas are proposed for treatment. The project sites are located across the Bankhead National Forest (BNF). Several sites are within the Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The areas proposed for treatment are in the Mountain Springs, McDougle and Central Lookout, Beech Creek, Dry Hollow, Holmes Chapel, Moreland, Black Pond, Cranal and Wolf Pen, Hepsidam, Stinson Gap, Caney Creek and Capsey Creek areas. They are found in Forest Service management compartments 58, 52, 46, 76, 31, 126, 161, 166, 94, 44, 53, 90, 116, 69, and 8. All sites are located within Winston or Lawrence counties. The sites proposed for treatment are existing wildlife openings, pine plantations and associated log landings and southern pine beetle impacted areas.

The purpose and need for the project is to improve wildlife habitat by providing permanent early successional habitat and to provide opportunities for hunting and wildlife viewing. The project will construct, expand, and/or rehabilitate wildlife openings on the Bankhead National Forest, including the Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area. Wildlife openings are a common wildlife management practice in the southeast. They are utilized as a wildlife management tool by state and federal resource agencies as well by private land owners. Wildlife openings on Bankhead provide multiple benefits for demand species. Demand species are defined as harvestable species that are in high public demand for consumptive uses including white-tailed deer, eastern wild turkey, and northern bobwhite quail.

The project areas are within Management Prescription 7.E.2, Dispersed Recreation Areas with Vegetation Management, and 9.C.3, Southern Cumberland Plateau Native Ecosystem Restoration and Maintenance, as outlined in the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan ([RLRMP](#)). The emphasis in 7.E.2 is to manage areas to provide a variety of dispersed recreation opportunities, improve the settings for outdoor recreation, and enhance visitor experiences, in a manner that protects and restores the health, and diversity of the land. The emphasis in 9.C.3 is to manage the area to maintain or move towards restoration of a mix of hardwood, hardwood-pine and pine (including shortleaf and longleaf) forest communities based on historic conditions. Additionally, the [RLRMP](#) provides direction in Goal 16 to provide habitats to support desirable levels of selected species (e.g., species with special habitat needs such as large, contiguous forested landscapes; species commonly trapped/hunted; or species of special interest). The majority of the project areas are within Area 1 as described in the Bankhead National Forest's Forest Health and Restoration Project Environmental Impact Statement ([FHRP](#)).

Implementation of this decision will provide additional early successional habitat (grass/forb and shrub/seedling/sapling associations) for wildlife in the Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area, a need identified in the [FHRP](#) (September 2003).

The proposed treatments for this wildlife habitat improvement project are described here. The project will construct eight new wildlife openings totaling 21 acres. New construction includes building new wildlife openings (WLO) and daylighting existing roads. New construction will be accomplished with a bulldozer or mulching machine or combination. The project will expand and/or rehabilitate 14 wildlife openings totaling 41.5 acres. Expansion includes enlarging an existing WLO with a bulldozer or mulching machine or combination. Rehabilitation includes reclaiming an existing WLO that has grown up in brush and saplings too large to be treated through mowing. Rehabilitation will also be accomplished with a bulldozer or mulching machine or combination. All vegetation will be removed from the sites. Vegetation will be pushed outside the site into the surrounding stand or mulched into the ground. After clearing, the sites will be disked and planted to control any potential erosion. Hay mulch may be applied if needed. Species planted will be dependant upon season of treatment and desired future condition of the site. No invasive species will be planted. After initial construction, expansion or rehabilitation, wildlife openings may be managed by planting on an annual or semi-annual basis, disking, mowing, burning or a combination. Herbicides may be used to control non-native invasive plants present in wildlife openings. The use of herbicides for non-native invasive species control is included in the Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact and Environmental Assessment for the Bankhead National Forest's Non-native Invasive Plant Species Control Project (August 2004). Snags and den trees will not be treated except where they pose a safety hazard. Riparian areas and wetlands will not be treated. Glades and rock outcrops will not be treated.



Example of Existing Conditions



Example of Desired Conditions

Rational for the Decision

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an EIS or EA because it is consistent with the following categories from Forest Service Handbook 1909.15-2004-3, dated 07/06/2004:

Section 31.2 (6) - Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service Level D).

I find that this project is appropriate for categorical exclusion within this category because no extraordinary circumstances exist as defined in FSH 1909.15, 30.3.2.

Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species. – A biological evaluation (BE) for this wildlife habitat improvement project has been completed. The determination was “Not likely to adversely affect” Indiana bat and “No Effect” on the other 23 T & E species listed for Bankhead National Forest. The determination was “No impact” on Forest Service Sensitive species. The US Fish and Wildlife Service concur with these findings.

Flood plains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds. – The proposed action does not include floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds, and forest plan standards are implemented to prevent off site impacts.

Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas. – No congressionally designated areas are within the project area.

Inventoried roadless areas. – No part of the project area is designated as inventoried roadless area or research natural area.

American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites or Archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas. – A cultural resource assessment was conducted on many of the project treatment areas as a part of the Forest Health and Restoration Project's thinning in Compartments 8, 116, 166, 76, 44, 31, 69, 94, 52 timber sales and Bankhead's Prescribed Burning program. Known sites near the project area will be protected from ground disturbing activities. Sites not included in previous cultural resource assessments will be surveyed prior to ground disturbing activities. Therefore, the proposed treatments will have no impact on significant cultural resources.

Public Involvement and Analysis

A public scoping notice for this project was published in the Northwest Alabamian on April 16, 2005 and in the Moulton Advertiser on April 20, 2005. Additionally, a letter notifying interested parties about the project was mailed to the District mailing list on November 11, 2005. One supportive comment was received. A legal advertisement establishing formal notice and comment period was published in the Northwest Alabamian on December 17, 2005. Additionally, a letter notifying interested parties of the formal comment period was mailed to the District mailing list on December 13, 2005. One additional comment was received in support of the project. Two comments were received requesting further information about the control of non-native invasive species in the wildlife openings proposed for treatment.

Findings Required by Other Law

National Forest Management Act - My decision is based on an analysis of the situation and this action is consistent with the [RLRMP](#), Goals and Objectives.

Implementation

Implementation of this decision may begin immediately upon publication of the Notice of Decision in the paper of record (*Northwest Alabamian*).

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12, this decision is not subject to appeal.

Contact Person

For further information, contact Glen Gaines, Bankhead National Forest, PO Box 278, Double Springs, AL or at (205) 489-5111.

/s/ Glen D. Gaines
GLEN D. GAINES
District Ranger
Bankhead National Forest

August 13, 2007
Date

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