



DECISION MEMO

Midstory Removal for RCW Habitat Enhancement 2008



USDA, Forest Service
National Forests in Alabama
Talladega National Forest – Oakmulgee District
Bibb, Hale, and Perry County, Alabama

I have decided to treat approximately 650 acres of mid-story vegetation in longleaf stands in Compartments: 11, 13, 23, 39, 44, 61, 67, and 118. (Reference Figure 1)

Proposed Action: The Proposed Action will serve as a much needed maintenance of the mid-story for the identified cluster sites. A Cut and Leave treatment will be utilized, which entails a hand crew using chainsaws to fell undesirable vegetation and leave it on the ground. There is no ground disturbance using this method. There is also a provision in the contract to prevent the cutting of dogwoods unless they are located under the drip line of an RCW cavity tree. All of the treatment areas were designed to enhance Good Quality Foraging Habitat (GQFH) as defined by the RCW Recovery Plan. Treatment areas are located within or adjacent to 16 active clusters. By removing the mid-story vegetation as well as following those areas with a prescribe burn within a few years, the project should move these areas towards desired future conditions.

Background:

Currently the undesirable vegetation is shading out native grasses and legumes that are the preferred under story within a longleaf ecosystem as well as impeding the RCW’s fly-ways. Historically prescribe fire has been the preferred method for controlling midstory vegetation. However, with changing environmental factors, such as prolonged droughts, removing the midstory vegetation by chainsaw and implementing a follow-up prescribe burn when conditions are more favorable can prove to be a viable alternative.

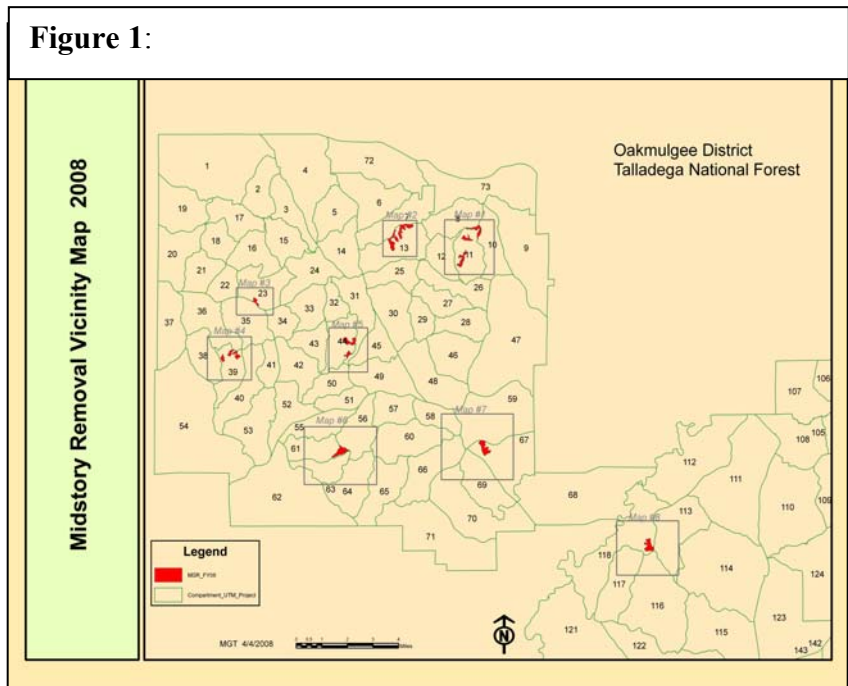
Mitigation Measures: The proposed action has been designed to include considerations for Forest Plan (Revised Forest Land and Resource Management Plan) standards. No areas lie within any Streamside Management Zone. There will be no ground disturbance with the use of chainsaws and the use of herbicides is not a part of the project proposal.

Appropriateness for Categorical Exclusion:

The proposed action can be categorically excluded from documentation in an EIS or and EA because it is falls within the category 6 from Forest Service Handbook (FSH)1909.15, section 31.2:

“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.”

Figure 1:



- This action will improve habitat conditions for the Endangered RCW.
- This action will provide habitat conditions to support other desirable species.
- This action will maintain desirable under story community types and conditions.
- No new road construction is required or is necessary to implement this action.
- This action does not include the use of herbicides.

The categorical exclusion should be appropriate in this situation because there are no extraordinary circumstances potentially having effects which may significantly affect the environment 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* - A site-specific biological evaluation for the project areas has been conducted for this project and the determination of effects regarding federally-listed endangered or threatened species or their habitats, and sensitive species or their habitats have been documented in a Biological Evaluation which is in the project file on the District.

In accordance with FSM 2672.41 and FSH 2609.13, a Biological Evaluation (BE) was prepared to evaluate the effects of the planned activities on PETS species. The proposed actions should have a “not likely to adversely affect” determination for the RCW due to the project having entirely beneficial results. The USFWS concurred with the determination and no further action with the agency is required. The proposed action would also have a “no impact” determination for any of the species listed on the Regional Forester’s Sensitive species list.

- *Floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds* – The proposed treatment areas are not in a floodplain, wetland or municipal watershed and forest plan standards are implemented to prevent off-site impacts.
- *Congressionally designated 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 survey on treatment areas will be completed prior to any ground disturbing activities. However, areas treated by chainsaw, will have no ground disturbance and no cultural resource survey would be necessary. Properties eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and their locations relative to the project areas have been reviewed by the University of Alabama – Office of Archeological Research (04-PA-11080104-065) and have been determined not to be affected by the Proposed Action.

The proposed action has been evaluated for the potential of direct, indirect and cumulative resource impacts. None of the project areas are on steep slopes or highly erosive soil. Appropriate Forest Plan standards were applied in its design and no resource impacts were identified that could not be mitigated below significance.

Public Involvement: A proposal to perform mid-story removal was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions on October 1, 2007. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for input in the form of a Pre-Decisional letter which also served as the request for comments. A list of the agencies, organizations, and persons contacted is in the project folder and available upon request. A legal notice of the final 30-day comment period was posted in the *Tuscaloosa News* on April 12, 2008, the paper of record for the Oakmulgee District. There were no comments received from the public.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS:

National Forest Management Act: This decision is consistent with the Revised Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (RFLMP) as required by the National Forest Management Act. The project was designed in conformance with forest plan goals, objectives, and standards. Specifically this project meets Forest Plan goals for contributing to the recovery of PETS species (Goal 11), maintaining forest and plant community types not abundant on private lands (Goal 1), and providing habitat to support desirable levels of selected species (Goal 16). Applicable Forest Plan standards are located in the project file.

Clean Water Act: The Forest Plan contains direction to ensure all projects comply with the requirements of the Clean Water Act. Therefore by following that direction, this project is in compliance with the Clean Water Act.

IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

Appeal Rights: No comments were received from the public, therefore this decision is not subject to appeal and can be implemented immediately.

Responsible Official:

/s/ Cynthia Ragland

Date:

May 14, 2008

Cynthia O. Ragland
District Ranger
Oakmulgee District
Talladega National Forest

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