

Chapter III. Evaluation of Outcomes on the Land

The NFGT analyzed the information found in Chapter II and the results are shown below.

Issue A. Ecosystem Condition, Health and Sustainability

Sub-Issue 1. Biological Diversity

- Third-year stocking exams conducted in 2009 found that 29.6 percent of the stands had adequate stocking of the desired species. First-year survival exams found that 54.9 percent of the stands had adequate survival. Seedling survival was adversely impacted in 2009 by inadequate rainfall. The Angelina County weather station recorded average rainfall in 2009; however, lack of adequate precipitation during the early growing season months (January and February) is a significant cause of seedling mortality. In January 1.43 inches of rain fell and in February only 2.16 inches fell. Since the NFGT is at the extreme western edge of the natural range for pine species, it makes seedling establishment difficult.
- The FSveg age-class distribution report for the end of 2009 shows a continuing trend towards an older forest. For instance, the acres in stands over 100 years old have increased from 15,037 acres in 1992 to 69,094 acres in 2009, which is a 359 percent increase. Likewise, the acres in young stands age 0 (currently being regenerated) to 10 years old are just 8 percent of what they were in 1992: 83,612 acres in 1992 to just 7,321 acres in 2009.
- In FY 09, the NFGT prescribed burned approximately 139,053 acres. The *Plan* set an annual objective of approximately 100,000 acres of prescribed burning per year. The average acres burned over the nine years is about 96,688 acres.

The majority of management indicators have indicated stable or increasing trends through the past five-to-ten years. The RCW population is at 346 active clusters, a new milestone for the NFGT. In the past three years, increased emphasis has been directed at evaluating previous known management indicator plant sites, verifying location, documenting and evaluating status, and identifying protection and management needs. In addition, surveys in potential habitat have found a number of new locations for R8 TES and MIS. All new and relocated occurrences have been inventoried using GPS and added to the corporate database.

- Habitat for MIS (Management Indicator Species) is generally improving throughout the forests and grasslands. Increased prescribed fire efforts are revealing greater improvements in both the number of certain element occurrences and quality of each occurrence for fire-dependent plant species like the Louisiana squarehead. Through an evaluation of GIS data and FSveg, it is evident that communities such

as the longleaf pine, shortleaf pine and tallgrass prairie are being restored and increasing. Most species' habitat and trends appear to be stable or increasing.

Most MIS' long-term trends appear to be stable or increasing, with the exception of the Acadian Flycatcher and the Wood Thrush.

- Most resident T&E and Sensitive Species populations are increasing. The RCW populations are at an all-time high. Habitats for other sensitive species appear to be stable.

Sub-Issue 2. Forest and Range Health

- Only one fine particulate matter monitoring site is located within 40 kilometers of any of the National Forests or Grasslands in Texas. The Harris County PM_{2.5} monitor (EPA Site ID #482010024) is located 40 kilometers south of Sam Houston National Forest. Fine particulate matter levels near the Sam Houston National Forest are below both the 24-hour and national air quality standards. Therefore, prescribed burning activities has not caused or contributed to any exceedances of the PM_{2.5} NAAQS at this location.
- No SPB infestations were detected on the NFT in FY 09. The NFT participated in the spring southern pine beetle survey, and results from the survey predicted extremely low populations, as no SPB were captured. The number of the SPB insects, clerids and predators collected fell from the previous year. The NFT also participated in fall SPB trapping, a new program designed to provide early warning of SPB outbreaks. No SPB were collected in the fall. No detection flights were made due to the low level of SPB activity predicted.
- In FY 09, 1,473.7 acres were treated for noxious weeds: 430 acres on the Caddo/LBJ NG, 385.6 acres on the Davy Crockett National Forest, 376 acres on the Sam Houston National Forest, 157.1 acres on the Sabine National Forest, and 125 acres on the Angelina National Forest. In addition, NNIPS surveys were conducted forest-wide. This survey focused on primary vectors for infestations such as utility rights-of-ways, special use sites, recreation sites, and road right-of-ways. Approximately 6,600 GPS (Global Positioning System) points were recorded as individual NNIPS infestations across the NFGT in acreages ranging from 0.001 acre (single tree) to 20 acres.

▪ Sub-Issue 3. Watershed Conditions

- No soil and water disturbances occurred that were identified by NFGT personnel as exceeding the soil loss tolerance levels set out in the *Plan*. In 2009, TFS (Texas Forest Service) did not conduct a BMP (Best Management Practices) compliance review on the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas. Hurricane Ike hit Texas in

September 2008 and most of the work during 2009 was related to Hurricane Ike salvage.

- As part of the NFGT's endeavors to protect soil and water resources in FY 09, the Caddo and LBJ NGs continued to implement an active Watershed Improvement Program. Actions included the completion of 50 acres of watershed improvement.

Issue B. Sustainable Multiple Forest and Range Benefits

Sub-Issue 1. Outdoor Recreation Opportunities

- In FY 09 trails data was loaded into the Infrastructure Application (INFRA) database, and trail condition surveys along with the trail bridge survey met protocols. The updating of this data base is an annual and ongoing process. The Recreation Enhancement Act (REA) Fee Legislation (that replaced the Fee Demonstration Program) has been implemented.
- Law enforcement officials continued their patrols of OHV use areas and issued citations to users for violations of riding laws and for creating unacceptable resource damage. In some areas where OHV use has not been deterred by issuing citations, LEOs have arrested the violators and towed away their OHVs to gain compliance.
- To begin working toward the Scenery Management System which is tied to GIS, the Forest decided to staff a Landscape Architect position in the Supervisor's Office beginning in FY 09.
- The TMR was finalized and published on November 9, 2005 (70 FR 68264). This regulation recognizes OHVs as a legitimate use of the National Forest System lands, but requires that OHV use be carefully managed. The TMR restricts the use of motorized vehicles to designated roads, trails, and areas. The Rule requires the designations be made at the local level, with public involvement, in order to continue to provide the citizens of the country with the use and enjoyment of these public lands, while protecting the important environmental resources, services, values and uses of these public lands.

The TMR requires that each unit of the NFGT (the Sam Houston, Davy Crockett, Sabine, and Angelina NFs as well as the Caddo/LBJ National Grasslands) determine which roads, trails, and areas would be open for motorized vehicle use in a separate process and publish a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) designating those roads, trails and areas open for motorized vehicle use on each unit. Amendment # 9 was signed on January 4, 2008 which implemented the TMR. MVUM maps have been produced for each unit and distributed to Forest users.

Sub-Issue 2. Infrastructure

- All road construction in FY 09 was in compliance with contract specifications and *Plan Standards and Guidelines*.
- A total of 278.15 miles of road reconstruction was accomplished. All of these miles included wing ditches with appropriately designed J-hooks.
- Approximately twenty percent of the NFGT facilities were inspected and the data was entered into the INFRA data base.
- Ground was broken for the new NFGT Supervisor's Office at the old administrative site in Lufkin, Texas in November 2008. Work continued on the building during FY 09. The 18,000 square-foot facility will be constructed using the agency's new "green" standards. The building should be ready for occupancy in early 2011.
- Because of Hurricane damage by storms, Rita and Ike and the amount of land line boundary re-survey work that has and will be accomplished under the hurricane contracts, the National Forests are catching up with the 10 year rotation criteria in the Forest Plan. The National Forests in Texas (Angelina, Sabine, and Davy Crockett) are in much better shape as far as the 10 year boundary line rotation criteria. These contracts are still on-going and have helped tremendously to keep up with the Landline Maintenance rotation and helps regain the ground that we had lost in monumenting and maintaining property boundaries

Sub-Issue 3. Human Influences

- There is a constant rise in use of NFGT lands that are near large urban areas such as Dallas, Fort Worth and Houston.) The Sam Houston NF, near Houston, experienced increased use by OHVs - specifically all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) - from people living in nearby subdivisions. This created unauthorized trails and associated resource damage on the forest. Due to this increase of violations, one additional LEO (Law Enforcement Officer) was added and assigned to the Sam Houston NF.
- Law enforcement agents are still encountering an increased amount of controlled substance use activity on the NFGT.
- Inspections of land use authorizations in FY 09 indicated that most activities were in compliance with the terms of authorization

Sub-Issue 4. Roadless Areas, Wilderness, Wild and Scenic

- A National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) survey was completed in FY 08. The survey revealed that visitor use of wilderness areas remains low.

Sub-Issue 5. Timber

- For the last ten years, an average of 19.0 percent of the *Plan* specified ASQ has been sold. Since the probability of exceeding ASQ is unlikely, this is not a real issue for the NFGT.
- The NFGT needs to identify areas of concern and develop associated project plans to build up the timber harvesting program in order to meet *Plan* target levels. This will help the NFGT in moving toward meeting its *Plan* management objectives for habitat improvement, forest health, age-class distribution and restoration needs.
- Project plans, prescriptions, environmental assessments and decision documents that were developed in FY 09 were reviewed and found to be in compliance with the *Plan*. On-site inspections of silvicultural practices, including site preparation and tree planting, found no violations of *Plan* standards.
- Third-year stocking exams conducted in 2009 found that 29.6 percent of the stands exceeded the lower level of the FW-204-1 standard for the planted species. Stands that were below minimum survival levels (for planted seedlings) were checked for stocking. Enough natural seedlings were established to increase the total stand stocking levels (planted and natural seedlings) above the *Plan* minimum level for most of the deficient stands. The remaining deficient stands will be monitored to see if sufficient suitable natural seedlings become established to adequately stock the stands. Only in cases where stands are grossly deficient in suitable stocking will additional site preparation and planting be considered.
- No timber was harvested on unsuitable lands solely for timber management purposes.

Sub-Issue 6. Forage

- Grassland allotments are being managed to a satisfactory condition of fair to good. In FY 09, the grassland units continued to implement a fundamental change in grazing schemes that began in 1998. The focus changed from year round grazing to a seasonal grazing system. This implemented a high intensity/low duration grazing system which resulted in a higher number of cattle grazing for a shorter grazing period. The change resulted in fewer total AUMs (Animal Unit Months - this is equal to a cow and a calf grazing for one month); however, it still provided for the desired grazing results.

Sub-Issue 7. Other Products

- Minerals activities on the NFGT have effects at the national and local levels. These effects include adding additional jobs, increasing revenues to local shops

and businesses, providing royalties to local residents, impacting local roads, increasing or decreasing payments in lieu of taxes to local counties. Inspections in FY 09 indicated most activities were in compliance with operating plans. There were no spills reported during FY 09.

Sub-Issue 8. Heritage Resources

- In FY 09, there were no projects which implemented *Plan* Standards and Guidelines that adversely affected historic properties.

Issue C. Organization Effectiveness

Sub-Issue 1. Economics

- Since the NFGT is no longer allocated funds based on a percent of its need (as identified in the *Plan* as funds needed to accomplish its goals and objectives), tracking actual expenditures and comparing them to the average projected budget shown in the *Plan* is the only way the NFGT has to determine how much less than *Plan* projected dollars are received. In FY 09, NFGT expenditures were \$23,810,173 compared to the *Plan*'s projected average budget needs of \$26,657,400.

Sub-Issue 2. Evaluating New Information

- **2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule** –During 2009, national direction was issued to clarify how units should handle areas designated as roadless in the 2001 rule. This was done to respond to two conflicting rulings that were issued by the U.S. District Courts in Wyoming (2008) and California (2007). On May 28, 2009, Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack reserved final decision authority over certain forest management and road construction projects in inventoried roadless areas. The Secretary's Memorandum 1042-154 was intended to assure the careful evaluation of actions in inventoried roadless areas while long-term roadless policy continues to be developed and relevant court cases move forward.

This direction was modified in a letter dated August 3, 2009 and provided re-delegation of authority to the Forest Service to authorize —

Approval of any necessary timber cutting or removal or any road

- construction/reconstruction in emergency situations involving wildfire suppression, search and rescue operations, or other imminent threats to public health and safety in inventoried roadless areas. The local line officer is delegated authority to make these decisions.

Approval of any timber cutting, sale, or removal in inventoried roadless areas

- incidental to the implementation of an existing special use authorization.

- Road construction/reconstruction is not authorized through this re-delegation without further project specific review. The local line officer is delegated authority to make these decisions.

The Sam Houston NF has four areas that are being managed per the Secretary's direction. These areas are: Big Creek Scenic Area, Winters Bayou Scenic Area, a 200-acre track adjacent to Little Lake Creek Wilderness, and the Big Woods Areas in Compartment 80.

For the most up-to-date information about this issue, visit the Forest Service website at <http://www.fs.fed.us/> and look for a direct link to the Roadless Website.

- **National Forest System Land and Resources Management Planning Rule** - The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California invalidated the 2008 Planning Rule on June 30, 2009, holding that it was developed in violation of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Endangered Species Act (ESA). The 2000 rule legally came back into effect when the 2008 rule was set aside. The 2000 rule allows the Forest Service to develop, revise, and amend forest plans using the provisions of the 1982 planning rule.

The Department of Agriculture decided not to seek further review of the latest court decision. It was determined that a new planning rule is the best way forward because the agency needs a stable planning rule to meet current and future needs of the National Forest System. Developing a new planning rule provides the opportunity to help protect, reconnect, and restore national forests and grasslands for the benefit of human communities and natural resources. The development of the new rule will provide new direction to help the Forest Service respond to modern challenges, including restoring and conserving forests, protecting watersheds, addressing climate change, sustaining local economies, improving collaboration, and working across landscapes.

As an interim measure, the Department will republish the 2000 planning rule, as amended, in order to make it available to the public in the Code of Federal Regulations. This action will facilitate its use by forests and grasslands in the National Forest System to revise and amend plans while a new rule is being developed.

The public can visit <http://www.fs.usda.gov/planningrule> to find out more about this ongoing process.

- **Hurricane Ike**-Salvage operations from Hurricane Ike were conducted in 2009. The Sam Houston and Davy Crockett National Forests (NFs) sustained the hardest hit, followed by the Sabine and Angelina NFs.

On the Davy Crockett National Forest, much of the wind damage occurred within RCW clusters. Based upon preliminary sketch mapping of damage area by helicopter, 74% of the damage areas were within the HMA, and 62% of the active clusters showed to have moderate to severe damage. However, nearly all active and inactive clusters were impacted by the hurricane, especially clusters in the northern portion of the Forest. Many active clusters lost one or more cavity trees and many non-cavity trees as well. Artificial cavities (inserts) were installed immediately following the hurricane in those clusters losing active cavity trees or those found not to have at least four suitable cavities. A total of 238 inserts were installed in 85 clusters.

On the Sam Houston National Forest, damage from Hurricane Ike was less severe. A total of 25 active and 3 inactive RCW clusters were located in areas where salvage logging occurred. Artificial cavities were installed in clusters losing active cavity trees or in clusters not having at least four suitable cavities in the weeks immediately following the hurricane.

- **Wildland Urban Interface-** To deal with a wildland urban interface issue, the NFGT conducted numerous prescribed fire and mechanical fuel treatment activities to reduce the potential for damaging wildfires occurring and spreading to intermingled private lands. In FY 10, the NFGT will continue its prescribed fire program and increase efforts to mechanically treat strips of land along federal property boundaries to help mitigate the potential for the spread of wildfire.
- In FY 09, the NFGT made a total of \$3,655,940 in payments to counties that contain NFGT lands.