

DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Alpine Project – Compartments 75 & 80
and Non-Significant Forest Plan Amendment #5

USDA Forest Service
Sabine National Forest, Sabine Ranger District
Sabine County
April 2004

Decision Notice

Decision

I have examined the initial Proposed Action and the three alternatives to the Proposed Action, which have been considered in detail. I have found that each of the seven significant issues have been addressed in at least one of the alternatives. The Sabine District Team completed an interdisciplinary analysis of the effects that the Proposed Action and alternatives would have on the environment.

I have selected Alternative 3 for implementation. My decision is based on the analysis and process described in the environmental assessment (EA). We received no comments during the 30-day Notice and Comment Period.

Alternative 3 includes the specific activities described below:

- Thinning approximately 910 acres of pine-dominated stands in Compartments 75 and 80;
- Thinning about 210 acres within C-75 for eagle habitat improvement;
- Removing slash pine through shelterwood cutting on 40 acres within C-75;
- Restoring upland hardwoods on 30 acres in C-80 by mechanical means and herbicides;
- Regenerating an old SPB spot to longleaf pine through mechanical site preparation, burning, and planting approximately 10 acres within C-80;
- Regenerating another old SPB spot to loblolly pine using mechanical site preparation, burning, and planting about 20 acres in C-80;
- Prescribed burning approximately 1,580 acres in both compartments;
- Eradicating invasive non-native Tallowtrees on about 15 acres in C-75 using herbicides; and
- Reallocating approximately 45 acres in C-75 from Management Area 1 (MA-1) Upland Forest Ecosystems to MA-10a Administrative Use Sites through Non-Significant Forest Plan Amendment #5.

In addition to the applicable Standards from the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (the Plan), the management requirements described below, as well as monitoring detailed on page 22 in the EA, are part of my decision, and will be implemented to lessen adverse effects of Alternative 3.

- ✓ No logging will occur within streamside zones along perennial or intermittent watercourses (MA-4). These protection zones will be managed for water quality and the aquatic biota.
- ✓ The ephemeral streams requiring protection have been identified (see Project File) and will be protected with the standard 33-foot protection zone as a minimum. Any other ephemeral streams identified during project implementation that require protection will also have a minimum 33-foot protection zone established.
- ✓ Wet sites, such as bogs and seepage zones, will be identified and protected (the Plan, pages 83 and 152). No logging or equipment will be allowed in these areas, and no stream crossings will be designated in these areas.
- ✓ A potential wetland has been identified in C-75, stands 23 and 24, in which thinning and invasive non-native eradication is proposed under Alternatives 3 and 4. Thinning would not occur in this potential wetland area. No mechanical equipment would be allowed in this area.
- ✓ Logging will be restricted in wet weather. The District Timber Sale Administrator will monitor conditions and promptly shut down timber sales when erosion and soil compaction will be unacceptable.
- ✓ Temporary haul roads and skid trails will only cross streamside zones at designated points, with prior approval of the Sale Administrator. The Plan's Standards and Guidelines, and Texas' Best Management Practices (BMPs) will be followed in all stages of sale implementation (the Plan, page 158)
- ✓ All temporary roads, skid trails, and landings will be closed and revegetated with a seed mixture beneficial to wildlife, following use. Within one growing season, ground cover will be established on 70 percent of the area of all log landings, temporary roads, and skid trails (the Plan, page 106).
- ✓ Stream restoration projects, such as fish ladders for fish passage or structures for bank stabilization, current deflection, or pool enhancement will help to improve aquatic habitat along Indian Creek and FS Road 189 in C-80.
- ✓ State Highway 21, and Farm-to-Market (FM) 83, 242, 1368 and 3121 pass through the project area, including stands 7-9, 19, and 21-23, 25 of Compartment 75 and stands 4, 6-8, 10 and 30 of Compartment 80. FDR 192 passes through stands 5, 7 and 15 of Compartment 75. Lakeshore is a boundary in C-75, stands 1-3, 7, 15 and 26. Guidelines for the indicated travel ways and lakeshore are as follows: felling is to be directed away from the edge of

paved highways and the lakeshore within a 200-foot top and scatter zone; visible slash within the 200-foot zone is to be removed or chipped or lopped to lie within two feet of the ground; locate log decks out of sight; vary densities of thinning if possible; apply marking of leave trees so it's not visible from the travelways or lakeshore; and schedule work during minimum recreation use (the Plan, pages 76 & 77).

- ✓ If cultural or historical sites are encountered during the implementation of this project, the project will be stopped. The site will be surveyed and evaluated by a professional archaeologist, and the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) will be afforded the opportunity to review the report. The site area will be excluded from all treatments until this review can be completed.
- ✓ Prescribed fire will only be applied under an approved Burning Plan to meet specific resource objectives, and under the supervision of a qualified Burning Boss. The Burning Plan will plot the trajectory of the smoke plume, identify smoke-sensitive areas, predict fire behavior, and set parameters for burning conditions to minimize risk of resource damage or fire escape. Burns will be conducted within weather and fuel moisture parameters established for the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (NFGT).
- ✓ The Forest Supervisor's Office, Texas Forest Service, County Sheriff's Office, Volunteer Fire Departments, and adjacent landowners will be notified prior to ignition of any prescribed burn.
- ✓ If herbicides are used, workers will wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants made of tightly woven cloth that must be cleaned daily. They will wear a hard hat with a plastic liner, waterproofed boots and gloves, and other safety clothing and equipment required by labeling. They will bring a change of clothes to the field in case their clothes become contaminated. Workers will also take soap, wash water separate from drinking water, eyewash bottles, and first aid equipment to the field. Notice signs will be clearly posted.
- ✓ Bald Eagle – If a previously undocumented nest is located after project implementation has started, cease operations and report immediately to the District Biologist. If prescribed burning has started before an undocumented nest is found, implement the following protective actions immediately: 1) notify the Burn Boss, stop damaging activities, and protect the nest tree if needed; 2) cease operations within 1500 feet of nest tree as quickly and safely as possible; and 3) notify the District Biologist and the District Ranger immediately, so the appropriate actions can be implemented.
- ✓ Bats – If roost colonies are located during project implementation, the District Biologist will be notified immediately, and steps will be taken to protect the site.
- ✓ Other Threatened and Endangered Species – If any other Federally Listed or Sensitive Species are encountered during project implementation, the District Biologist will be notified immediately so the appropriate management actions can be implemented.

Reasons for the Decision

I have selected Alternative 3 over other alternatives for the following reasons:

1. Alternative 3 meets the purpose and need for the project, improving the health of forest communities by reducing Southern pine beetle (SPB) hazard and establishing vegetation consistent with the Ecological Classification System (ECS) (EA, pages 3-6).
2. Thinning 1,120 acres will help to reduce the SPB hazard (EA, pages 4-5). Thinning stands 25 and 26 of Compartment 75 would also help to improve habitat for bald eagle (EA, pages 11 and 55).
3. Alternative 3 employs the shelterwood harvest method to completely remove non-native slash pine from C-75, stand 6 (EA, pages 11 and 49).
4. Alternative 3 will effectively provide for successful regeneration of longleaf pine in C-80, stand 9, by controlling competition with herbicide (EA, pages 11 and 49).
5. Upland hardwoods will be effectively restored to C-80, stand 3 (EA, pages 5-6, 11, 47, and 49).
6. Alternative 3 will most effectively eliminate non-native invasive Tallowtree with the use of herbicide (EA pages 13 and 50).
7. Prescribed burning under Alternative 3 will help to reduce the understory and encourage herbaceous growth (EA, pages 6 and 48).
8. Alternative 3 provides for logical management and addresses visual quality issues around the Sabine National Forest's new office site in C-75, by re-allocating the area surrounding the new office site from MA-1 to MA-10a (EA pages 13 and 78).
9. Alternative 3 improves about five miles of existing roads, restoring the road surface and replacing drainage structures. It also decommissions 0.8 mile of roads.

Proposed Action, Purpose and Need

The Proposed Action, (including thinning, group selection harvesting, upland hardwood restoration, prescribed burning, and managing the transportation system) was first brought forward in August of 2001. The project was proposed to help move the site-specific desired condition described in the Land and Resource Management Plan, as amended (the Plan), thereby contributing to the goals and objectives of the Plan (EA, pages 3-4).

Public Involvement and Issue Identification

Internal and external scoping involved resource professionals and interested members of the public and is documented in the EA, page 7. Initial scoping began April 9, 2002, in a letter

mailed to the Sabine District mailing list, describing the Proposed Action, and assigning NEPA number 07-01-006. The district mailed the EA to the public for a 30-day Notice and Comment Period on February 5, 2004. The Interdisciplinary Team, composed of several Forest Service professionals and technicians, identified seven significant issues given below (and detailed on page 7 of the EA).

1. The use of herbicides may cause a reduction in water quality in unnamed creeks in Compartments 75 and 80. No site-specific concerns about the use of herbicides were raised during scoping, but the Plan and the Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Coastal Plain/Piedmont (VMEIS) (1989) specify using herbicides only when necessary, and to analyze alternatives to herbicide use. Herbicide use will be considered a significant issue because of the Plan and the VMEIS.
2. The Proposed Action does not develop or directly benefit bald eagles or their habitat. Compartment 75, stands 25 and 26 are dense loblolly pine stands that lie adjacent to Toledo Bend Reservoir. Bald eagles might nest in these stands if they were more open.
3. Group selection harvesting, proposed for C-75, stand 6 would not remove the slash pine seed source. Successful restoration of loblolly pine would require additional treatments.
4. The Proposed Action does not restore longleaf pine to C-80, stand 9. Southern pine beetle killed the pine trees that originally occupied this area, and young hardwood saplings, such as sweetgum, black gum, elm, and maple quickly gained dominance. Soils indicate that this is a longleaf pine site.
5. The Proposed Action does not restore loblolly pine to C-80, stand 27. Young hardwoods, such as sweetgum, black gum, elm, and maple also dominate this stand, where soils and landform show that it is a loblolly pine site.
6. The Proposed Action does not eliminate the invasive, non-native Tallowtree. Tallow seedlings and saplings area growing in C-75, stands 23, 24, 26, and 27. This species could quickly dominate and change the natural character of these areas.
7. The Proposed Action does not provide for logical management, nor does it address visual quality issues that have arisen around the Sabine NF's new office site in Compartment 75, stands 15 and 30.

The team used the significant issues to design alternatives to the Proposed Action. No comments were received from the public during the 30-day Notice and Comment Period.

Alternatives to the Proposed Action

The following alternatives were considered in detail. They are fully described, and contrasted on pages 8-16 of the EA, and a description summary in table form is also given on pages 17-19 of the EA.

Alternative 1 – This is the No Action Alternative. The Proposed Action would not be implemented. This alternative responds to one of the issues, but does not meet the purpose and need for the project.

Alternative 2 – This is the Proposed Action, under which 980 acres of pine-dominated stands would be thinned; 50 acres of would be regenerated to loblolly pine by group selection cutting and planting of loblolly, while thinning between groups; and 30 acres of upland hardwood forest would be restored by mechanical means and herbicide use. About 1.1 miles of temporary roads would be used to remove timber. Approximately 1,030 acres would be prescribed burned on a 3-7 year cycle. No MA re-allocation would take place under this alternative.

Alternative 3 – This is the Selected Alternative, and is described on page 1 of this document.

Alternative 4 – This alternative is identical to Alternative 3, except no herbicides would be used.

For each alternative, all applicable Standards and Guidelines in the Plan and the Mitigation Measures and Management Requirements of the Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetative Management in the Piedmont/Coastal Plain (FEIS-VM) would be applied (EA, pages 19-20).

Alternative 3, along with the other alternatives, were evaluated as to their effects on the environment. Some of the important effects are summarized in a comparison table on pages 18-19 of the EA, and detailed effects are given on pages 23-78.

Findings Under the National Forest Management Act or Other Laws and Regulations

- ◆ Shelterwood harvesting is appropriate to meet the goals and objectives of the Plan and the need to remove non-native slash pine for regeneration of native pine species on 40 acres in Compartment 75. These activities were proposed because they would be effective in bringing the area closer to the desired future condition for MA-1 (EA, pages 5, 7, 11, and 19).
- ◆ Alternative 3 is consistent with the Plan. The actions planned in Alternative 3 are consistent with the Management Objectives, Standards, and Guidelines for MA-1.
- ◆ Alternative 3 includes measures to avoid or mitigate negative impacts (40 CFR 1505.2(c)) (EA, pages 19-22). The project is feasible and reasonable, and it conforms to the Plan's overall direction to manage the forest.

- ◆ The proposed activities (which alter vegetation) comply with the requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b) by following Standards and Guidelines and mitigating measures in the Plan and in the FEIS-VM:
 1. The prescribed actions are best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the project area in the Plan. Potential environmental (EA, pages 23-78), biological (EA, pages 43-74), heritage resources (EA, page 42-43), aesthetic (EA, pages 39-42 and 75), engineering (EA, pages 12, 23-37), and economic impacts (EA, pages 74-75) were considered in this determination.
 2. Generating the greatest dollar return or the greatest output of timber were not the primary reasons for selecting the prescribed actions.
 3. The effects on residual trees and adjacent stands of trees have been considered (EA, pages 43-52).
 4. The prescribed actions, with included mitigation measures, avoid impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources (EA, pages 20-22, 23-37).
 5. The prescribed actions are expected to achieve the desired effects on water quantity and quality, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired species, forage, recreation, aesthetic values, and other resources (EA, pages 31-76).
 6. Harvesting and transportation requirements, as well as total costs of preparation, logging, and administration are practical (EA, pages 74-75).

NFMA Finding of Non-Significance for Amendment of the NFGT Land Management Plan

Alternative 3 proposes a Forest Plan Amendment for changes to area allocations in Management Areas 1 and 10a. This Non-Significant Forest Plan Amendment #5 would add about 45 acres (stand 30) to MA-10a, bringing the total administrative use area for the office and surrounding land to approximately 55 acres. The increase in acreage in MA-10a would give the Sabine Ranger District the options and flexibility to increase the scenic conditions of the area surrounding its new office. Stand 30 would be thinned to 50 square feet of basal area to create a more open park-like setting around the office. Future objectives for this area might include development of a picnic area or an interpretive trail loop for forest visitors. Chapter 5 of the Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.12 lists four factors to be used to determine whether this amendment is significant or non-significant: timing; location and size; goals, objectives, and outputs; and management prescriptions.

1. Timing - The management area changes would be implemented immediately to improve the scenic condition of the area around the new office site. Delaying the allocation changes to the next planning period would delay development of interpretive and recreational opportunities to forest visitors.

2. Location and Size - The Plan allocated approximately 218,000 acres to MA-1. This represents roughly 32 percent of the 672,800 acres within the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (NFGT). The reduction of approximately 45 acres from MA-1 represents less than 0.02 percent of the total acres of the NFGT.
3. Goals, Objectives, and Outputs - The reduction in acreage in MA-1 might cause a slight decrease in the long-term sustained yield and Allowable Sale Quantity of timber under Alternative 3. This would be based on the assumption that stand 30 would be considered unsuitable for timber management. Because the number of acres to be removed from MA-1 is so small, this change would have practically no effect on outputs.
4. Management Prescriptions - These management area changes would not affect the management prescriptions for the various MAs. This change only applies to this specific reallocation of land on the Sabine National Forest. The desired future conditions for stand 30 would be altered on an insignificant amount of land. The anticipated goods and services to be produced would change from regeneration and restoration of forest communities (MA-1) to providing the public and employees safe and adequate facilities with a pleasant appearance (MA-10a).

Finding of No Significant Impact

During evaluation of environmental effects, all foreseeable actions that may cause direct, indirect, or cumulative effects were analyzed with all alternatives (EA, page 23-78).

Based on the process and analysis shown in the environmental assessment, along with experience with similar forest management activities, I have determined that implementation of the selected alternative, with the associated mitigation measures, is not a major federal action, either individually or cumulatively, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed.

This determination was based on the following factors:

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered and this action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the environment (EA, pages 23-78).
2. The Selected Alternative will not affect public health or safety (EA, page 75-76).
3. The prescribed actions will not affect any unique characteristics of the geographical area (historic or heritage resources, wetlands, floodplains, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness areas, etc.)
4. The effects of this project on the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. Scientific opinion with regard to specific environmental effects of this project is relatively undivided (see FEIS-VM). Broad-level public disputes with forest

policy are beyond the scope of this decision. Page 7 of the EA discusses the public contacts made in the course of the environmental analysis, and documents the issues identified from these contacts. The Sabine District Team has made every effort to listen to public concerns and to incorporate them into the decision process.

5. The Selected Alternative does not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks. The Sabine Ranger District has successfully carried out all prescribed activities in similar situations in the past.
6. This decision does not set precedent for future action with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.
7. Cumulative effects of the action in the Selected Alternative and other foreseeable actions have been evaluated throughout the EA (pages 25, 30-31, 36-37, 39-40, 42-43, 45, 51, 53-74). There will be no significant cumulative effects between this project and other ongoing or planned projects on either national forest or private land. The effects of other foreseeable future actions, as well as past actions and ongoing actions were included in this analysis.
8. No known sites listed or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by the proposed activities. If heritage resource sites are discovered during actual operations, activities will be stopped until the sites can be protected or evaluated for significance. Prescribed activities will not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.
9. The Selected Alternative will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act. The Forest Service consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and determined that the actions are not like to affect any endangered or threatened species (Biological Evaluation, Appendix A).
10. None of the prescribed actions threaten or lead to violations of federal, state, or local environmental laws, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. This will be ensured by carrying out the selected actions in a way that is consistent with the standards and guidelines, management requirements and mitigation measures established in the Plan. For water quality management, state-approved Best Management Practices will be used for this project. The project will be monitored to ensure BMPs are implemented and appropriate corrective measures will take place, if implementing the BMPs on a specific site results in effects significantly higher than anticipated, because of unforeseen site factors or events. This project will fully comply with state approved BMPs and the Clean Water Act.

Implementation and Appeal Rights

This decision is not reviewable under the Forest Service Administrative Appeals Process because no person provided comments during the 30-day Notice and Comment Period (36 CFR 215.11).

For further information concerning this decision or the Forest Service Appeal Process, contact District Ranger Eddie Taylor at the Sabine Ranger District Office, 211 S. Palm, Hemphill, TX 75938, or phone 409-787-3870.

Responsible Official:

/s/ Fred S. Salinas

4/27/04

Fred S. Salinas
Forest Supervisor
National Forests and Grasslands in Texas

Date

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