



File Code: 1950

Date: March 8, 2012

Greetings from the Sylamore Ranger District:

My name is Jim McCoy. As Ranger of the Ozark National Forest's Sylamore District, I'd like to invite your participation in planning the *Indiana Bat Habitat Restoration Project*. This is a landscape scale project involving harvest and other mechanical treatments, prescribed burning, and treatments with herbicide to improve and maintain roosting and foraging habitat for the endangered Indiana bat. It also involves construction of gates on four caves this species uses during hibernation. Our proposal is summarized in Attachment 1; a map showing the geographic scope of the proposal is also attached. No activities are being proposed on private land.

Disturbance during hibernation, habitat loss and degradation have contributed to the decline of Indiana bat populations. Caves bats use during hibernation are called hibernacula. Less than one percent of caves within the range of this species are suitable for hibernation. Ten Indiana bat hibernacula occur in Arkansas; five are located in a fairly concentrated area of the Sylamore District. Only one of these is currently gated. The forested areas surrounding a hibernaculum serve as important habitat for this species. In the summer and fall, Indiana bats roost under the loose bark of mature trees during the day and forage for flying insects in or along the edges of forested areas by night. Quality foraging habitat for the Indiana bat consists of open forested habitats, forest edges and streamsides. Preferred roost trees usually receive direct sunlight for more than half the day and are typically within canopy gaps in a forest or along a wooded edge.

The Forest's Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) includes standards developed in consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service for management of Indiana bat habitat. These include standards to designate conservation zones within ¼ mile (primary zones) and 5 miles (secondary zones) of hibernacula and standards to develop foraging habitat through regulation and maintenance of canopy closure. The Forest Plan and supporting documents may be viewed on the Forests' website at <http://www.aokforests.com/>. Satellite data indicates the current percent canopy closure exceeds the desired ranges for primary and secondary Indiana bat conservation zones.

In 2009 a major ice storm damaged several thousand acres of trees across the District. Insects and disease often invade damaged trees and woody debris after an event such as an ice storm. Trees stressed by injury or secondary damage from insects or disease may appear healthy for years then go through a rapid decline and die following a period of stress such as high temperature or drought. When susceptible trees are abundant as they are on the District, disease and insect populations can multiply rapidly and spread to adjacent, healthy stands. Without management, widespread mortality followed by shifts in stand structure and composition could occur affecting the area's suitability for the Indiana bat and other native species.

Because the timing and location of delayed impacts of ice storm damage cannot be predicted, and because the most effective combination of these treatments to attain the desired percent canopy closure is not certain, an adaptive management approach with an emphasis on monitoring is needed to ensure the size and species of trees needed by Indiana bats for roosting are sustained and to provide quality foraging habitat for this species. Hibernacula also need to be managed to limit the potential for disturbance while the bats are hibernating.



Alternatives Currently Being Considered

Alternatives currently being considered for this project include 1) a no action alternative in which no activities would be implemented and 2) the proposed action alternative as described in this letter.

Submitting Comments

We invite you to participate in the development of this project and are asking for your comments on it. All comments received, including those submitted anonymously will be considered. Comments can be submitted via the U.S. Postal Service or courier, via e-mail, facsimile, or telephone or they can be presented in person at our office. Our contact information is provided in the letterhead. Hand-delivered comments may be submitted at the District office in within the normal weekday business hours of 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. To mail a comment electronically, use a common digital format (without attachments) and submit it to the following e-mail address: comments-southern-ozark-stfrancis-sylamore@fs.fed.us . If you wish to be notified when the Environmental Assessment (EA) for this project is available, please provide your name and mailing address or an e-mail address when submitting a comment. A public open house for this project will be held on Friday, March 16, 2012 from 11 am to 6:30 pm at the Ozarka College Lecture Hall, 1800 Ozarka College Drive in Mountain View, AR. Sylamore District resource management staff members and I will be on hand to answer questions and receive comments.

Comments are welcome at any time, but those received within 30 days of this notice will be especially useful in the preparation of the EA. Please be as specific as possible with your comments or in expressing concerns so that we can more effectively address them. Comments received, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record for this project and will be available for public inspection.

Thank you for your interest in the management of the Sylamore Ranger District. If you have questions regarding this proposed action please contact District Timber Management Assistant Ed Spence or District Fire Management Officer Scott Osborne at (870) 269-3228.

Sincerely,

/s/ James R. McCoy

JAMES R. MCCOY
District Ranger, Sylamore-St. Francis Ranger Districts

jlf
Attachments (2)

ATTACHMENT 1
Indiana Bat Habitat Restoration Project
Summary of the Proposed Action

Percent canopy closure would be shifted toward or maintained at optimal overstory density within Indiana bat conservation zones utilizing one or more of the mechanical, chemical and prescribed burning treatments listed below. The treatments will be implemented in accord with Forest Plan requirements and all applicable laws and regulations. An adaptive management strategy will be applied because though the effects of these treatments can be predicted with a reasonable degree of certainty, there are uncertainties regarding what the most effective combination of treatments is to achieve the project's objectives.

Stand examinations, surveys for non native invasive plant species, and surveys as required to protect sensitive resources will be completed prior to prescribing any treatments. A more detailed description of the proposed action will be provided in the EA and will include guidance for selection of activities to prescribe based on conditions found during survey. The extent of treatments implemented annually will not exceed the limits identified below. Distribution of treatment areas and impact thresholds will be taken into account prior to scheduling treatments to limit the potential magnitude of effects. If selected, implementation of the proposed action would most likely begin in fiscal year 2013 and would continue until desired conditions are achieved. We anticipate this would be no less than 12 years.

The **herbicides proposed for use** are limited to commercial formulations of glyphosate, triclopyr (amine and ester formulations), and imazapyr—the common name of the active ingredient in the commercial formulations. A citrus-based surfactant may be added to increase herbicide efficacy. Characteristics of these chemicals are discussed at length in their respective risk assessments:

- *Glyphosate—Human Health and Ecological Risk Assessment Final Report, #SERA TR-052-22-03b;*
- *Triclopyr—Revised Human Health and Ecological Risk Assessments Final Report, # SERA TR-052-25-03a, and*
- *Imazapyr—Human Health and Ecological Risk Assessments Final Report, #SERA TR-052-29-03a.*

These risk assessments are available for viewing at the Sylamore Ranger District Office in Mountain View, AR, or at www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/pesticide/risk.shtml. Herbicides will be applied to target vegetation at the lowest effective rates to achieve project objectives in accord with label instructions and Forest Plan requirements.

Monitoring strategies are being developed and would be implemented through collaboration with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the USFS Southern Research Station, other agencies and non-governmental partners. The effectiveness of treatments at attaining the desired percent canopy closure will be evaluated to determine conformance to Forest Plan standards FW47 and FW48; if the desired conditions are not being achieved, treatments may be adjusted.

Mechanical, chemical and prescribed burning treatments would be implemented to regulate and maintain canopy closure, to maintain open understory conditions and/or to regulate stand density, structure, quality and species composition. These may include commercial timber harvests, timber stand improvement actions, wildlife stand improvement actions, treatment on non native invasive plant species, mechanical treatments, and prescribed burning except within an area currently managed as a potential Roadless Area where only prescribed burning would be used.

Commercial timber harvests would be conducted to restore and maintain percent canopy closure within the desired ranges for primary and secondary conservation zones as outlined in Forest Plan standards FW47 and FS48 respectively. No more than 3,500 acres/year of thinning and regeneration cuts combined would be

planned. Harvests would be limited to areas with a sustained slope of less than 35 percent and that are generally within ¼ mile of an existing road except within the District's Special Interest Areas (City Rock Bluff, Clifty Canyon and Sandstone Hollow. Actions associated with extraction of harvested timber would also be implemented including include purchaser road maintenance (15 miles/year), road reconstruction (10 miles/year), and construction of log landings, skid trails and temporary roads. Log landing, skid trail and temporary road needs and locations would be dictated by topography in each sale area and shall be approved by the Forest Service prior to use. Temporary roads would be rehabilitated after a sale area is closed.

Timber stand improvement (TSI) actions would be conducted to increase the potential for oak, hickory and shortleaf pine seedling establishment, survival and growth and to control vegetation suppressing the growth of these overstory species. No more than 2,000 acres /year of TSI actions would be planned and may include one or more of the following: site preparation, release, pre-commercial thinning, non-commercial thinning and control of understory vegetation. Handtools, chainsaws, mechanical equipment, herbicide applications or prescribed burning may be used individually or in combination to conduct these actions. Target vegetation for these treatments would be woody species (except rare species) that are competing with selected dominant and co-dominant stems.

Wildlife stand improvement (WSI) activities would be conducted to promote growth of trees with high value for wildlife, to increase the potential for establishment of grasses and herbaceous plant species in the understory, to create snags for roosting, to restore site-appropriate vegetation such as within glades, or to control under- and mid story density. No more than 2,000 acres/year of WSI actions would be planned. These activities may include felling trees and woody stems with handtools, mechanical equipment, and/or selective herbicide applications; girdling trees to create snags; or use of prescribed fire, and mulching. Den trees and trees that produce mast (hard and soft) would be favored as leave trees.

Treatment of non native invasive plant species (NNIS) would be conducted to ensure native species are not displaced. No more than 1,100 acres/year combined of manual, mechanical, cultural and chemical control treatment methods would be implemented. Where actions with potential to spread NNIS are prescribed, NNIS surveys and treatment will be conducted prior to implementation. Any nonnative invasive plant species identified during implementation of TSI or WSI operations could be treated. If NNIS are found within streamside management zones (SMZ) or adjacent to bodies of water, the herbicides to be used would be limited to one of the herbicide formulations labeled for both terrestrial and aquatic use as required by Forest Plan standard FW32. No surfactant would be added for treatment of NNIS infestations in SMZs or those adjacent to bodies of water.

Mechanical treatments would be used where needed throughout the project area to increase the effectiveness of prescribed burns or to remove encroaching woody vegetation from open and edge habitat types such as glades, existing wildlife openings, roadways, recreation areas, administrative sites and developed recreation sites. Mechanical treatments include felling woody vegetation with chainsaws, a skid steer shredder or other equipment. Felled stems, limbs and brush may shredded or chipped. No more than 600 acres/year of mechanical treatments would be planned.

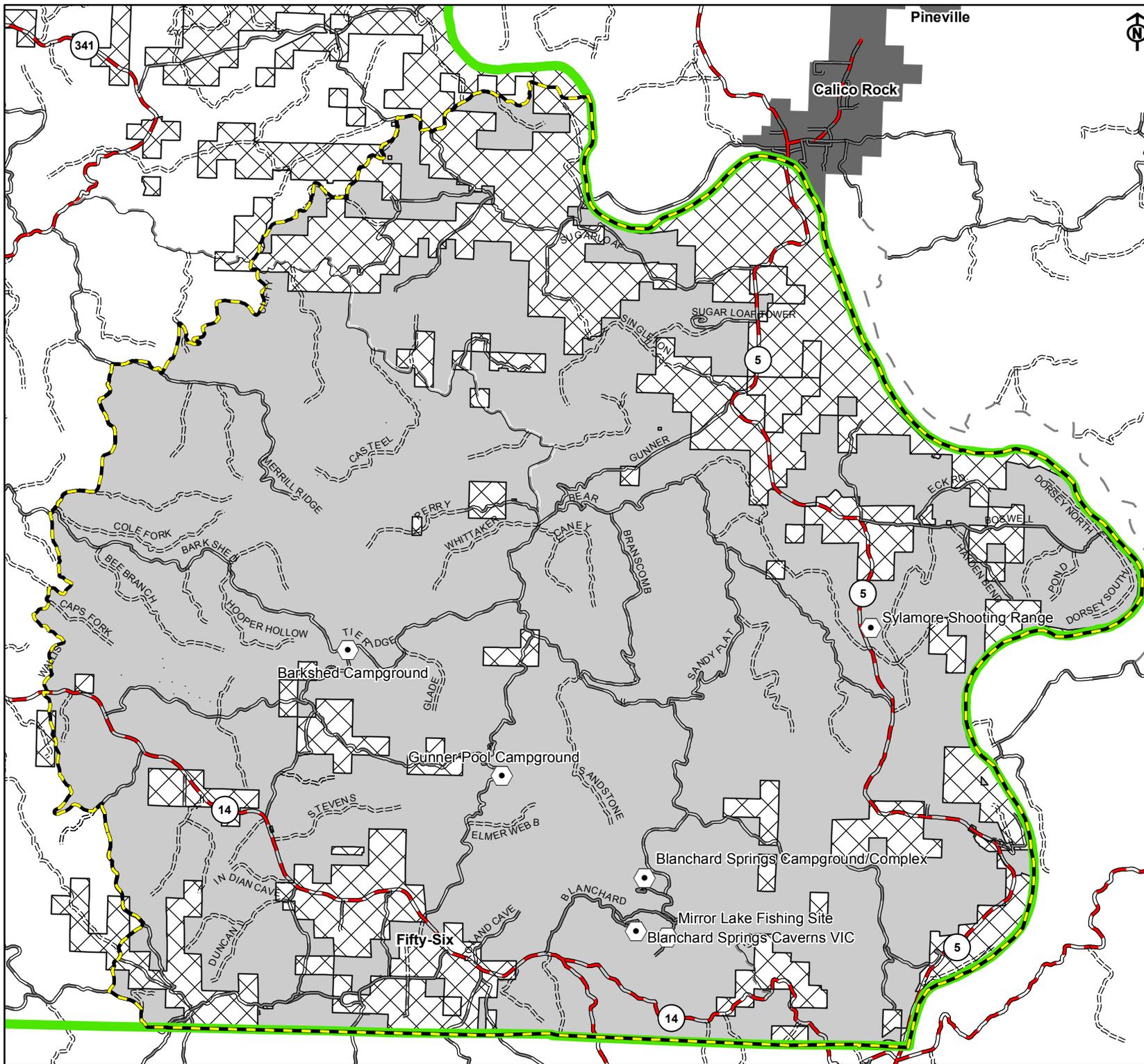
Prescribed burning would be used to restore the fire return interval under which the ecosystem evolved, to improve fire regime condition class, to maintain open understory conditions and to promote the growth of native grasses and forbs. All National Forest Service System lands within the proposed project area may receive this treatment during the course of this project, but no more than 15,000 acres/year would be burned. The acres to be treated in a given year would be burned in units on different days; an entire burn unit may not necessarily be burned in a single scheduled operation. Prescribed burning operations may occur during either the dormant or growing season; the return interval and season will depend on conditions, management objectives and monitoring results. The Forest Service's smoke management policies and the guidelines

outlined in the Arkansas Smoke Management Program (http://www.forestry.state.ar.us/manage/smoke_management.pdf) will be followed on all prescribed burns. Existing roads, streams and control lines established for previous prescribed burns within the proposed project area will be used as firebreaks where practicable. Where suitable firebreaks are not already in place, handline will be constructed when possible, but construction of new prescribed fire control lines with a dozer may be required in some instances. It is estimated between 1.0 and 2.0 miles of prescribed fire control lines may be constructed with a dozer per year.

Reforestation (planting) would be conducted in areas following regeneration harvest if natural regeneration does not meet Forest Plan requirements or where warranted due to damage. Conversion of dominant species within a stand from hardwood to pine or pine to hardwood is not being proposed. No more than 700 acres per year would receive this action.

Cave gates may be installed at the entrances of Indiana bat hibernacula to protect this species during the hibernation period. Cave gate design would be developed and approved in coordination with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

Efforts to provide educational material to the public through interpretive signs, informational kiosks, Visitor Information Center displays and web postings will be made throughout the duration of the project to foster a better understanding of land management practices and to promote forest stewardship.



Indiana Bat Habitat Restoration Project

OZARK NATIONAL FOREST

Sylamore Ranger District
ARKANSAS

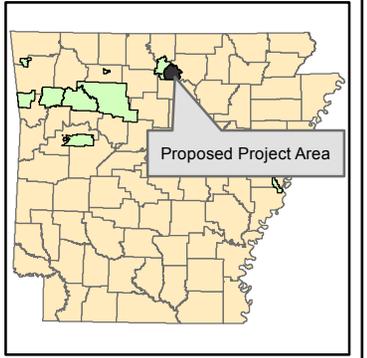
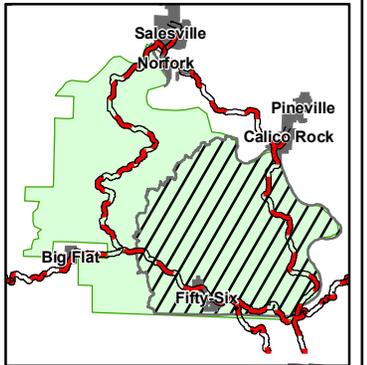
Vicinity Map

- Recreation Areas
- Indiana Bat Habitat Restoration Project Area Boundary
- District Boundary
- Private: 20065 acres
- National Forest: 67218 acres
- City Limits
- State Highway

Legal Description

T15N-R10W Sec. 6
 T15N-R11W Sec. 1-12
 T15N-R12W Sec. 1-12
 T16N-R10W Sec. 30,31
 T16N-R11W Sec. 1-36
 T16N-R12W Sec. 1-36
 T16N-R13W Sec. 1,12,13,14,24,25,36
 T17N-R11W Sec. 7,15,22,26-35
 T17N-R12W Sec. 10-12,13-16,20-36
 T17N-R13W Sec. 36

0 0.45 0.9 1.8 Miles



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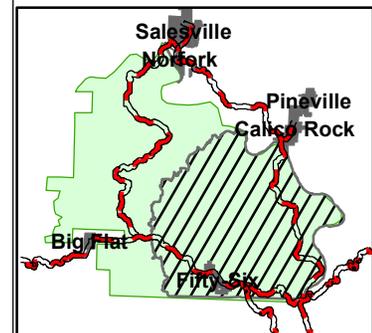
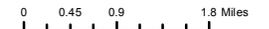
Proposed Vegetation Management Activities

-  District Boundary
-  Indiana Bat Habitat Restoration Proposed Project Area
- Areas within 1/4 mile of an existing road and with sustained slopes of <math>< 35\%</math>. Potential for commercial timber harvest, TSI, WSI, NNIS treatment, reforestation and mechanical treatments as proposed.
-  Potential for TSI, WSI, NNIS treatment, reforestation and mechanical treatments as proposed.
-  Potential for TSI, WSI, NNIS treatment, reforestation and mechanical treatments as proposed.
-  Potential for Prescribed Burning Only (Managed as Roadless Area)
-  Private

* Prescribed burning is proposed on all National Forest acres within the project area boundary.

Legal Description

T15N-R10W Sec. 6
 T15N-R11W Sec. 1-12
 T15N-R12W Sec. 1-12
 T16N-R10W Sec. 30,31
 T16N-R11W Sec. 1-36
 T16N-R12W Sec. 1-36
 T16N-R13W Sec. 1, 12, 13, 14, 24, 25, 36
 T17N-R11W Sec. 7, 15-22, 26-35
 T17N-R12W Sec. 10-12, 13-16, 20-36
 T17N-R13W Sec. 36



*Depending on conditions and management objectives TSI and WSI actions could include one or more of the following: pre-commercial thinning, non-commercial thinning, site preparation, release, control of understory vegetation, mulching and/or burning.

