United States Department of Agriculture **Forest Service** **Sylamore-St. Francis Ranger Districts**

1001 East Main
Mountain View, AR 72560
Phone 870-269-3228
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File Code: 1950
Date: June 7, 2012

Dear Sir or Madam:

The St. Francis District is in the process of planning and conducting and environmental analysis for the *St. Francis National Forest Ecosystem Restoration Project*. This project would involve the use of mechanical, chemical and prescribed burning treatments to move the ecosystems of the St. Francis National Forest closer to desired conditions outlined in the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests' Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). The purpose of this letter is to invite your participation in the planning process for this project. We are interested in and welcome your thoughts.

The geographic scope of this project includes all National Forest System acres within the boundaries of the St. Francis National Forest except those within the Turkey Ridge Natural Research Area as shown on the attached map. No activities are proposed on private property.

SUMMARY OF THE PROJECT PROPOSAL

The ecosystems comprising the St. Francis National Forest include an annually flooded bottomland hardwood forest that transitions to an upland hardwood forest on the higher, drier sites of Crowley's Ridge. In both of these ecosystems, there are areas where the potential for mast production has decreased, resilience to environmental stressors is declining, little advanced oak regeneration is present, and non-native invasive plant species are present. Native bamboo, also known as river cane or switch cane is present but is sparse and degrading in the form of canebrakes. Canebrakes are important for some small mammals and neotropical migrant birds.

As stand examinations are completed, treatments would be prescribed individually or in combination to manage density, structure, quality, and composition of vegetation species. Annual limits for implementation of each type of activity proposed are outlined in Attachment 1.

YOUR INVOLVEMENT

If you have information you feel the Forest Service may not be aware of, have concerns, or just want to let us know what you think about this proposal, we want to hear from you. Any significant issues that are identified from comments we receive may be used to develop alternatives to the proposed action for meeting project objectives, develop mitigation for a treatment, or modify the proposal's design. Those who respond to this invitation for comments will be notified when the Environmental Assessment (EA) is available for a thirty-day public comment period. If you choose not to comment, but would like a copy of the EA or wish to be notified when the EA is posted on the Forest website, please contact Jan Franks at (870) 269-3228 ext 3234.

Your 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. When submitting a comment, please provide your name and email or mailing address so that we may notify you when the EA is available. Comments should be submitted to: District Ranger, Sylamore and St. Francis Ranger Districts, Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, Attn: *St. Francis National Forest Ecosystem Restoration Project*, 1001 East Main, Mountain View, AR 72560. Telephone and FAX numbers are: Phone (870) 269-3228, FAX (870) 269-3000. Hand-delivered comments may be submitted at the St. Francis Ranger District office in Marianna or the Sylamore Ranger District office in Mountain View 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-stfrancis@fs.fed.us .

Your 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 for this project. We would ask you be as specific as possible with your comments or in expressing concerns so that we can more effectively address them. Please be aware that 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 St. Francis National Forest. If you have any questions about this proposal, or need additional information please contact the project team leaders Jessica Wakefield or Ed Spence at (870) 269-3228.

Sincerely,

/s/ ***James R. McCoy***

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

jlf
attachments (2)

Attachment 1
St. Francis National Forest Ecosystem Restoration Project
Summary of the Proposed Action

The treatments described below would be used individually or in combination to move the project area toward meeting desired conditions for Bottomland and Floodplain Forest, Loess Slope Forest and associated rare communities as outlined in the Forest Plan. The treatments would be implemented in accord with Forest Plan requirements and all applicable laws and regulations. The Forest Plan and supporting documents may be viewed on the Forests' website at http://www.aokforests.com/. If the proposed action is selected, implementation would most likely begin in 2013 and would continue for approximately 10 years.

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 (NNIS), and surveys as required to protect sensitive resources will be completed prior to prescribing any treatments. The extent of treatments implemented annually will not exceed the limits identified below.

For treatments involving herbicide application, the herbicide(s) would be applied to target vegetation at the lowest effective rates to achieve project objectives in accord with label instructions and Forest Plan requirements. 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 which are available for viewing at the Sylamore Ranger District Office in Mountain View, AR, or at www.fs.fed.us/foresthealth/pesticide/risk.shtml:

- *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.

Monitoring strategies are being developed and would be implemented through collaboration with other agencies and non-governmental partners. The effectiveness of treatments at attaining the desired conditions will be evaluated as will the effect of the treatments; if the desired conditions are not being achieved or if impact thresholds are exceeded, treatments would be adjusted.

Mechanical, chemical and prescribed burning treatments would be implemented to regulate stand density, structure, quality and species composition, maintain open understory conditions and/or to restore or enhance site appropriate vegetation. These may include commercial timber harvests, timber stand improvement actions (TSI), wildlife stand improvement actions (WSI), NNIS treatments, mechanical treatments, and prescribed burning.

Commercial timber harvest on no more than 1,000 total acres/fiscal year would be conducted. Intermediate thinning, regeneration cuts (seedtree, shelterwood or clearcut), and single or group selection cuts may be utilized. 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. Where damaged, merchantable timber is found, it may be removed through salvage harvest or included in green timber sale volumes. Actions associated with extraction of harvested timber would also be implemented and may include purchaser road maintenance (2.0 – 5.0 miles/year), road reconstruction (3.0 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.

Reforestation (planting) of under-stocked stands on no more than 900 acres/fiscal year would be conducted where natural regeneration does not meet Forest Plan requirements. Site preparation may be conducted, on some portion of the acres to be replanted, using handtools, chainsaws, mechanical equipment, herbicide applications or prescribed burning in order to create conditions suitable.

Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) and Wildlife Stand Improvement (WSI) activities utilizing handtools, chainsaws, mechanical equipment, herbicide applications or prescribed burning may be conducted individually or in combination across the project area. No more than 1,000 acres/fiscal year of TSI treatments would be implemented; they may include one or more of the following: release, pre-commercial thinning, non-commercial thinning and control of understory vegetation. No more than 500 acres/fiscal year of WSI actions would be implemented. WSI activities may include felling trees and/or woody stems; girdling trees; use of prescribed fire, planting native species, and mulching. Den trees and trees that produce mast (hard and soft) would be favored as leave trees.

Treatment of NNIS infestations will involve herbicide application. No more than 750 acres/fiscal year of these treatments would be implemented. Where actions with potential to spread NNIS are prescribed, NNIS surveys and treatment will be conducted prior to implementation of those actions. 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.

Prescribed burning would be used to restore the fire return interval under which these ecosystems evolved, to improve fire regime condition class, to maintain open understory conditions and/or to promote the growth of native grasses and forbs on no more than 2,000 acres/fiscal year. The Forest Service's smoke management policies and Arkansas Smoke Management Guidelines (http://www.forestry.state.ar.us/manage/smoke_management.pdf) would be followed. 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 mechanical construction of new prescribed fire control lines may be required in some instances. It is estimated between 1.0 and 2.0 miles of prescribed fire control lines may be mechanically constructed per year.

Mechanical treatments would target areas adjacent to the Wildland Urban Interface and "high risk" areas, but may also be implemented to improve the effectiveness of prescribed burn operations where needed. The goal of mechanical treatments is to reduce/remove heavy, thick vegetation next to private development or areas of concern in order to establish a fuel break and defensible space. No more than 400 acres / fiscal year would receive this treatment. Mechanical treatments include felling woody vegetation with chainsaws, a skid steer shredder or other equipment. Felled stems, limbs and brush may shredded or chipped.

St. Francis National Forest
Ecosystem Restoration Project
Proposed Vegetation Management Activities

National Forest land with potential for prescribed burning, commercial timber harvest, TSI, WSI, NNIS treatment, reforestation and mechanical treatments as proposed. (21764 acres)

National Forest Land with potential for prescribed burning, TSI, WSI, NNIS treatment, reforestation and mechanical treatments as proposed. (989 acres)

Turkey Ridge Research Natural Area, No treatments proposed. (400 acres)

Private

Forest Boundary

Cities

Major Roads

0 0.375 0.75 1.5 Miles

*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.

The Forest Service uses the most current and complete data available. GIS data and product accuracy may vary. They may be: developed from sources of differing accuracy, accurate only at certain scales, based on modeling or interpretation, incomplete while being created or revised, etc. Using GIS products for purposes other than those for which they were created, may yield inaccurate or misleading results. The Forest Service reserves the right to correct, update, modify, or replace GIS products without notification. For more information contact: Ozark – St. Francis

Bear Creek Lake
St. Francis River
SR 44
LaGrange
Lee County
Phillips County
Mississippi
Storm Creek Lake
Mississippi River
West Helena

T2N-R4E Sec. 29, 30, 31, 32, 33
T1N-R4E Sec. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7,8, 9, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36
T1S-R5E Sec. 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 29, 30
T1S-R4E Sec. 1, 2, 311, 12, 13, 14, 23, 24, 25, 26