

**DECISION NOTICE
AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**USDA Forest Service R-8
Ozark National Forest
Boston Mountain Ranger District
Crawford, Franklin, and Madison Counties, Arkansas**

WHITE ROCK PRESCRIBED BURNING PROJECT

An environmental assessment (EA) is available in the district office in Ozark, Arkansas, for the **White Rock Prescribed Burning Project**. This document was prepared by an interdisciplinary team (ID Team) consisting of such experts as Fire Management Officer, Wildlife Biologist, Recreation Manager, Forester, Soil Scientist, Archeologist, Hydrologist, and Fisheries Biologist. They developed the purpose and need for action, proposed actions to meet the purpose and need, and evaluated the environmental impacts of proposed management treatments on National Forest land.

The project area consists of approximately 43,000 acres of federal lands within the boundaries of the Main Unit in Crawford, Franklin, and Madison Counties, Arkansas (figure 1). The purpose of this project is to improve wildlife habitat, restore ecosystems, reduce the hazard of wildfire to protect forest resources and enhance watershed conditions. Healthy forests and watersheds, a diversity of plant and animal species, safe and suitable access to the forest, a balance of traditional and emerging recreational opportunities, and continued local economic support are the desired future conditions for the project area as well as the Ozark National Forest as a whole. These management actions are in compliance with and contribute to goals and desired future conditions listed in the Revised Land and Resources Management Plan (RLRMP).

The Forest Plan calls for the use of a combination of prescribed burning, mechanical and vegetation treatments to lower the risk of catastrophic wildfire and restore fire-adapted ecological communities. Forest-wide objective (OBJ).57 states that Forest-wide, hazardous fuels reduction activities should be completed on between roughly 4 and 8 percent (50,000 to 100,000 total acres) of the Ozark-St. Francis National Forests' lands annually. Decades of fire suppression in the area has resulted in the dominance of fire intolerant trees with simultaneous reductions of overstory diversity, and declines in the quality of open areas for wildlife forage. In addition, natural mortality caused by red oak borer infestations and several severe droughts over the last decade has increased the volume of dead trees across the landscape, creating a potential hazard of wildfire from increased fuels buildup.

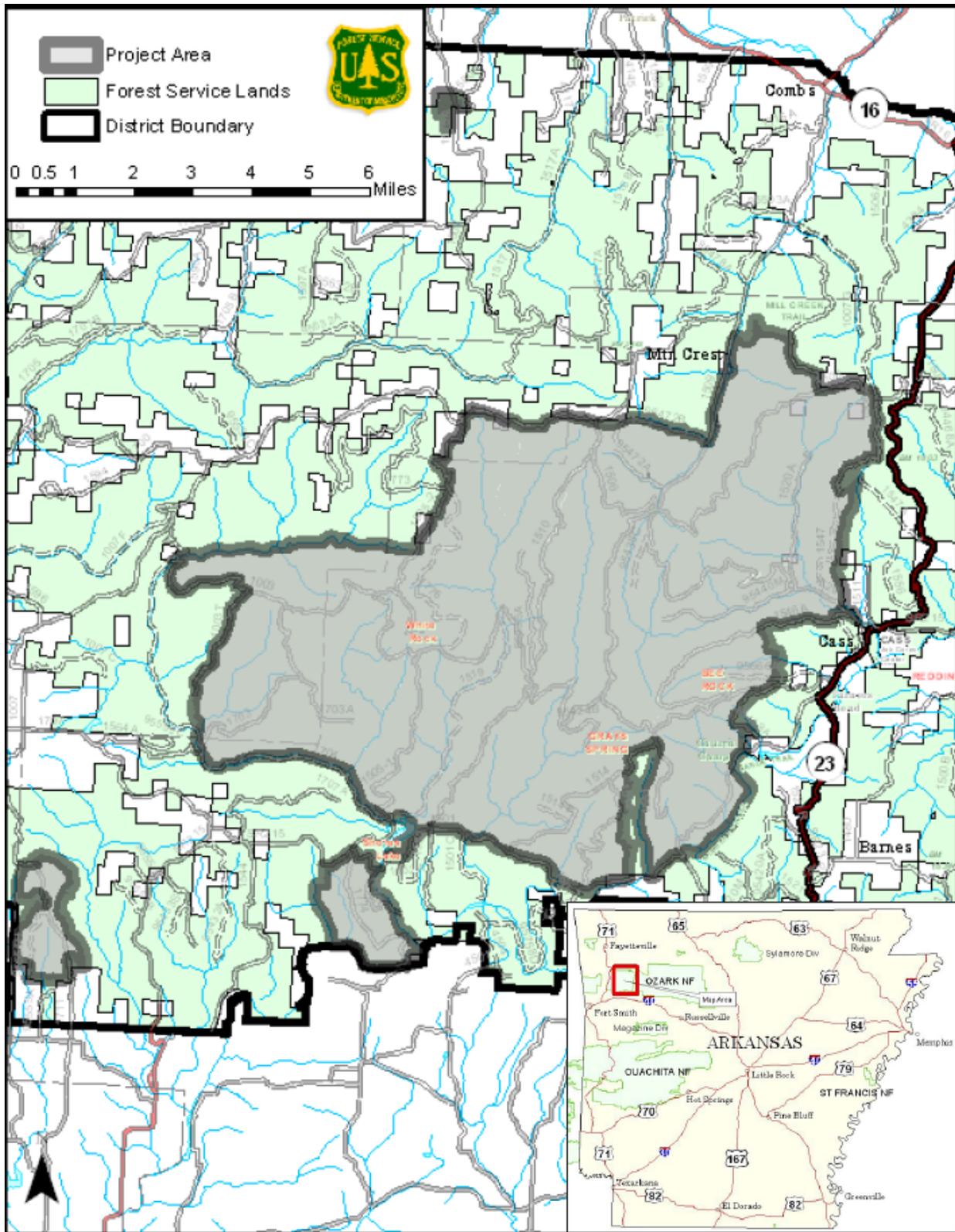


Figure 1. Vicinity map of White Rock Prescribed Burning Project

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND SCOPING

The Project was listed in Schedule of Proposed Actions. In September, 2012 a scoping letter and activity map was made available for a 30 day comment and posted on the Ozark-St Francis National Forests website.

The comment period ran from 22 September 2012 to 22 October 2012. In all, 305 letters were mailed to local landowners plus tribal and local governments and persons on the all-mail list. We received five responses to the scoping letter. The approximate dates for each burn unit in the scoping letter may not have appropriately captured the return interval or frequency for prescribed burning within the project area. Therefore, we sent a second scoping letter with a corrected proposal with an additional opportunity to comment lasting from 10 January to 11 February 2013. There were six responses within this comment period. Five of the comments were primarily supportive and dealt with concerns about adjacent private property. One commenter wrote in opposition to repeated burning as part of forest management. All the comments and Forest Service responses are a part of the project file and may be viewed at the district office.

DECISION AND REASONS FOR THE DECISION

Based on the results of the analysis documented in the EA, it is my decision to implement Alternative 1 as described in the EA. The activities in Alternative 1 are as follows.

PRESCRIBED BURNING

We propose prescribed burning as a management tool to augment timber, wildlife, recreation, and ecosystem enhancement activities to provide and enhance species habitat and wildlife viewing opportunities, reduce fuel buildups, and control non-native invasive vegetation and pests. Prescribed fire enhances the character of a forest by creating a more open setting that is aesthetically pleasing. Other benefit to the Main Unit includes stimulation of nutrient recycling by increasing the amount of sunlight reaching the forest floor. This would improve growing conditions for small herbaceous plants which increases browse and soft mast production for wildlife.

Dormant season prescribed burns will be conducted within manageable burn units to reduce burnable fuels (litter, slash, down timber, standing snags); growing season burns will be conducted to reduce under and mid-story species which can serve as ladder fuels. Post burn evaluations will be conducted to determine treatment efficacy and to determine the return interval and burning season most likely to lead toward accomplishment of management objectives. The burns will be implemented to reduce the existing litter layer. Forest-wide monitoring of prescribed burns conducted by Forest Soil Scientists has shown that duff layers are not entirely consumed. Also, from a sediment and soils standpoint, it has been observed that, in addition to adequate duff layer remaining post-burn, substantial revegetation occurs and negligible erosion take place in burn areas.

There are a variety of methods commonly used to ignite burn units. Some of the methods used most often by the Forest Service are hand ignition with drip torch, flare guns, and aerial ignition which will all likely to be used for this project. Fire will be allowed to back down from ridge-tops into hollows and drains; vegetated buffers will be maintained along perennial streams as

directed by the Forest Plan. Existing roads, streams and control lines established for previous prescribed burns within the proposed project area will be used as control lines where practicable.

Where suitable firebreaks are not already in place, construction of up to ten miles of new prescribed fire control lines may be required to safely execute prescribed burning in subunits of the project area throughout the life of the project. Prior to mechanical construction of any new prescribed fire control line, surveys for sensitive resources are required and the locations will be approved by Forest Service resource specialists.

Alternative 1 was selected because it best addressed the purpose and need in a balanced, cost effective way providing for a high level of resource outputs that can be maintained in perpetuity without harming land productivity. My conclusion is based on the project record that shows a thorough review of relevant scientific information, a consideration of responsible opposing views, and the acknowledgment of incomplete or unavailable information, scientific uncertainty, and risk. Analysis shows it:

1. Provides for early successional habitat by promoting volume and diversity of understory vegetation (EA p. 16-21, Appendix D).
2. Improves the quality and increases the growth of warm season forage (EA p. 18-21, Appendix D).
3. Will benefit early successional species while maintaining sufficient habitat for late successional species (EA p. 18-21, Appendix D).
4. Meets the standards and goals of the Forest Plan while not impairing water quality within watersheds (EA p. 16-18).

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

A Forest Service Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) reviewed the comments received during the scoping period and determined that there were no issues that could not be addressed through project design or mitigation measures, and therefore no alternatives to the proposed action were developed to respond to issues that were identified in the scoping process.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

All actions of Alternative 1 are consistent with the RLRMP and other applicable laws as follows:

1. The actions of this project are consistent with the RLRMP Vision, Strategy, and Design Criteria. The actions of this project occur in management areas for developed recreation areas, special interest areas, pastures and openings, mixed forest, old growth, high quality forest products, oak woodland, mixed forest, and riparian corridors. The actions in alternative 1 are consistent with the standards and guidelines for the RLRMP. Mitigation measures for environmental impacts have been fully applied in the planned actions. These mitigation measures include both monitoring and evaluation of planned actions. The project is feasible and reasonable, and it results in applying management

practices that meet the RLRMP's overall direction of protecting the environment while producing goods and services (EA p. 4-12). Some of the relevant priorities and objectives from the Forest Plan include: *Lower the risk of catastrophic fire and restore fire-adapted ecological communities through a combination of prescribed burning, mechanical, and chemical vegetation management treatments. ...Manage a fire program that will improve condition class, forest health, and ecosystem sustainability over the long term. (Priorities p. 2-28). Across all community types, burn under prescribed conditions 120,000 acres annually on average. (Objective 91 p. 2-29).*

2. All actions of this project are on those lands the RLRMP identifies as suitable for prescribed burning (RLRMP p. 2-26; 2-61, 2-64 and 2-65; EA p. 18-21).
3. I have determined that Alternative 1 complies with 36 CFR 219.27 (b) according to the following:
 - a. Is best suited to the multiple-use goals of the area with the potential environmental, biological, cultural resources, aesthetic, engineering and economic impacts as stated in the RLRMP, considered in this determination (EA p. 13-22).
 - b. Is not permanently harmful to site productivity and ensures conservation of soil and water resources (EA p. 16-18).
 - c. Does provide desired effects on water quantity and quality, wildlife and fish habitat, regeneration of desired species, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and other resource yields (EA p. 16-18, Appendix D).
 - d. Is practical in terms of transportation, staffing requirements and total costs of administration (EA p. 13-22).

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

I have determined that the proposed actions are 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 necessary. This determination is based on the following factors (40 CFR 1508.27):

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered and this action will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment (EA p. 13-22).
2. The actions are highly unlikely to have any long term negative effects on public health or safety (EA p. 21-22).
3. The project will not significantly affect any unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, wetlands, floodplains, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas (EA p. 16-21, Appendices C and D).
4. The project will not negatively affect the watershed (EA p. 16-18).

5. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial (EA p. 13-22).
6. The actions do not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks to the human environment (EA p. 13-22).
7. The actions in this decision will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration (EA p. 13-22).
8. There will be no cumulatively significant impacts on the environment. The cumulative effects of the proposed actions have been analyzed with consideration of other similar activities on adjacent lands, in past actions, and in foreseeable future actions (EA p. 13-22).
9. The actions will not affect any sites listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or will they cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources (EA p. 12, Appendix C).
10. The actions are not likely to adversely affect endangered or threatened plant or animal species, or their critical habitat (EA Appendix D).
11. None of the actions threaten to lead to violation of federal, state, or local laws imposed for the protection of the environment (EA p. 13-22).

For water quality management, state-approved Best Management Practices (BMPs), which are incorporated into the mitigation measures, will be used for this project. These BMPs are from the state water quality management plan, and have been designed with the goal of producing water that meets state water quality standards. The project will be monitored to insure BMPs are implemented. If implementing BMPs on a specific site results in effects significantly higher than anticipated, because of unforeseen site factors or events, appropriate corrective measures will be considered and implemented. This project will fully comply with state approved BMPs and the Clean Water Act.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION AND APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. Based on the April 2006 Federal Court decision in The Wilderness Society v. Rey, individuals or organizations who submitted comments or otherwise expressed interest in this action by the close of the comment period specified in 36 CFR 215.6 may appeal this decision.

A written appeal, including attachments, must be postmarked or received within 45 days after the date this notice is published in the Times Record, Fort Smith, AR. The appeal shall be sent to Ozark-St. Francis National Forests, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 605 West Main Street, Russellville, AR 72801-3614. Appeals may be faxed to (479) 964-7255. Hand-delivered appeals must be received within normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 a.m. Appeals may also be mailed electronically in a common digital format to appeals-southern-ozark-stfrancis@fs.fed.us.

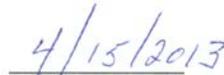
Appeals must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. If no appeal is filed within the 45-day time period, implementation of this decision may begin on, but not before, the 5th business day following the close of the appeal-filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 business days following the date of appeal disposition (36 CFR 215.9).

CONTACT PERSON

Further information about this decision can be obtained from Jobi Brown, NEPA Coordinator, Boston Mountain Ranger District, 1803 N. 18th St., Ozark, AR 72949; phone (479) 667-2191, email jobibrown@fs.fed.us.



WILLIAM DUNK
District Ranger
Boston Mountain Ranger District



Date

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