



File Code: 1950

Date: January 15, 2014

Dear Reader,

The Pleasant Hill Ranger District of the Ozark National Forest is seeking input for the project design of the Locust Gap Project in which an Environmental Assessment (EA) is planned to be completed by October 2014. The Locust Gap project area is located in Madison County, Arkansas. Locust Gap is bounded on the north, east and west by Hwy 16 while the southern boundary is bounded by Madison County Road 4310 as well as Clifty Creek. The town of Red Star is situated on the northern boundary of project area. The project area is also approximately 6.5 miles to the north and west of Fallsville and approximately 11 miles east of St. Paul. The legal description of Locust Gap project area is T13N R24W Sections: 1, 12; T13N R24W Sections: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 17, 18; T14N R25W Sections: 26, 35, 36; and T14N R24W Sections: 21, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, and 33. Locust Gap consists of compartments 270, 271, 272, 276, 277, 278. A map depicting the Locust Gap project area and management areas is attached providing further detail.

Current Conditions

Timber

The project area consists of aging forest stands of Oak, Hickory, Maple, Beech, Sweetgum, Blackgum, Pine, Elm, Birch, Basswood, Sassafras, Ash, Cherry, and Walnut. Understory species are Serviceberry, Dogwood, Hornbeam, Redbud, Hawthorn, Plum, and Spicebush, with herbaceous plants such as vaccinium (huckleberry/blueberry), poison ivy, Virginia creeper, greenbrier, Solomon seal, golden seal, ginseng, cinquefoil, sweet anis, etc.

Age-classes of the major forest vegetation types are as follows:

Locust Gap									
Age-Classes									
All - Age-classes by Timber Type									
Ages-Classes	0-10	11-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	101+	Total Acres (USFS)	%
Pine Acres	0	0	0	207	0	0	0	207	3
Hdwd Acres	9	33	429	39	538	3466	2328	6842	97
Total Acres	9	33	429	246	538	3466	2328	7049	
% of total acres (USFS)	<1	1	6	3	8	49	33		

82% of project area is over 80 years old; over 50% of area is 90 yrs old & one-third is over 100 yrs old



This project area was inventoried during the spring, summer, and fall of 2013. The previous inventory was completed in 1995. Some timber thinning and other forest stand harvests occurred between 1996-2000. Densities of the other stands have continued to increase until they have reached overcrowded conditions. The decline of forest health is evidenced by overmature trees that exhibit rot and fungi, broken out tops, and standing dead trees, as well as many that have fallen over. Some areas have sustained blow-down from straight-line winds and ice damage. Red Oak Borer activity has been observed in a few stands, but does not seem to be prevalent in the project area. However, as these stands age and crowded conditions persist, the opportunity for more mortality will increase.

The project area is well-roaded from both private land settlement and public/private timbering of the last 100 years. However, public roads that do not access private land are deteriorating. Access to public forest areas are prohibited in some instances by private land. The Forest Service will negotiate with those landowners to obtain right-of-way access to public land *only* if there is needed management of these forested areas.

National Forest land makes up about 7,049 acres and private land ownership makes up about 3,504 acres of the project area.

Wildlife & Fisheries

Non-Native Invasive Species (NNIS)

Field inventories during the summer of 2013 in the Locust Gap project area indicated that unwanted non-native invasive species (NNIS) are present. A species of primary concern is Tree of Heaven, which is an invasive plant native to Asia. This tree was introduced to the United States and competes with and replaces native vegetation, and degrades wildlife habitat.

Preliminary inventory indicates there are approximately 60 acres with severe infestation of Tree of Heaven. In addition, there are approximately 300 acres with moderate infestation of Tree of Heaven, and approximately 200 acres with low infestation of this species. All occurrences of this NNIS species are of concern due to its ability to spread and degrade wildlife habitat.

General Wildlife Habitat

In general the project area is composed of white oak – red oak – hickory forest type. Some areas of pine plantations exist in the project area, but make up a small component of the total project area. Hardmast (acorn/nut) producing trees, such as oaks and hickory, are very important to forest wildlife species. In much of the project area, oak and hickory advanced regeneration (saplings) are absent. Most of the tree saplings in the project area are shade tolerant species, such as red maple and black gum, which compete with oaks and do not provide high calorie food for wildlife. There is a concern that the amount of oak and hickory saplings in the project area is low enough that these important wildlife habitat trees will not be as abundant in the future.

Desired Future Conditions

According to the revised land resource management plan for the Ozark-St. Francis National Forest, the Locust Gap project area comprises 4 Management Area Classes: 1) Scenic Byway Corridors, 2) Riparian

Corridors, 3) Mixed Forest, and 4) Oak Woodland. As determined in the FLMP, the desired conditions of each of these management areas are described below;

Scenic byway corridor management areas are managed to offer visitors the opportunity to enjoy viewing natural and cultural landscapes along a well-maintained road. This particular management area includes approximately 949 acres or 13% of the project area along Hwy. 16.

The desired conditions for this particular management area will be to provide exceptional opportunities for motorized recreation, especially scenic driving. These management areas are easily accessed with a good road surface and provide informational signs for protection of the natural and cultural resources as well as the safety and comfort of visitors. Vegetation is influenced both by natural processes and humans. Biological communities are maintained or improved to provide an attractive setting for visitors while providing for the protection of rare communities and threatened, endangered, sensitive, and locally rare species. Forest management activities maintain the natural characteristics that make the area scenic. Commercial timber harvest is appropriate to maintain the long-term goals of a diverse and vigorous forest with sensitivity to dispersed recreation and scenic values. Timber harvesting operations focus on what is retained in the stand, not on wood fiber production. Timber harvest practices are visually subordinate to the surrounding landscape. Prescribed fire and other management treatments are appropriate vegetative management tools available to be used to enhance the byway corridors in conjunction with other resource values. These areas are characterized by predominance of mid- and late-successional forests. Forest structure varies according to ecological factors, but largely consists of a mature overstory; a fairly open midstory; and a well-developed herbaceous and shrubby understory.

Riparian Corridor management areas are located along the Little Mulberry and Clifty creeks and include approximately 132 acres or 2 % of the project area. Riparian corridors are managed to retain, restore, and enhance the inherent ecological processes and functions of the associated aquatic, riparian, and upland components within the corridors.

The desired conditions of riparian corridors reflect the physical structure, biological components, and ecological processes that sustain aquatic, riparian, and associated upland functions and values. The riparian corridor functions as a travel way for aquatic and terrestrial organisms. Suitable habitat is provided in riparian areas and, where applicable, in the associated uplands for riparian-associated flora and fauna, especially threatened, endangered, sensitive (TES), and locally rare species. Vegetative communities within the riparian corridor are productive and diverse providing for a rich variety of organisms and habitat types. The vegetative community within the riparian corridor is predominately forested. Desired conditions for aquatic systems within the riparian corridor stream systems are dynamic in nature as these systems normally function within natural ranges of flow, sediment movement, temperature, and other variables. Water quality remains within a range that ensures survival, growth, reproduction, and migration of aquatic- and riparian-associated wildlife species.

Mixed Forest management area encompasses approximately 710 acres or 10 % of the project area. These lands are managed to ensure the health and sustainability of the pine, pine/hardwood, hardwood/pine, and hardwood forest types across the landscape.

The desired condition of this management area is predominantly natural appearing with a diversity of forest successional classes and ecological community types. Thinning, prescribed fire at regular intervals

and regeneration harvests are common silvicultural treatments. Pine and oak woodlands are found throughout the area on appropriate sites. Late-successional to old growth characteristics are provided on suitable lands within this area. High quality, well-maintained roads through the area are designed to facilitate vegetative management and protect water quality. Other communities that occur on low productivity sites typically comprise a small proportion of the area. Rare communities within the management area are maintained at desired composition, structure, and function.

Oak Woodland management area is approximately 5,268 acres or 75% of the project area. The primary emphasis in this management area is to restore and maintain a landscape mosaic of open oak woodland that mimics historical conditions. The purpose is to provide habitat for associated plants and animals, some of which are rare and declining, and to create a setting for recreation that is aesthetically appealing, rich in wildlife, and not commonly encountered elsewhere.

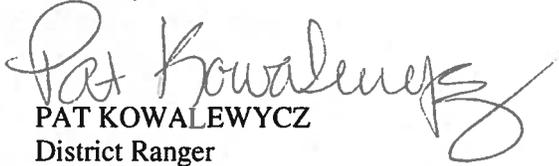
The desired condition for this management area is characterized by a mosaic of woodland and forest with oak woodland occupying approximately 60 percent of xeric and dry sites, and typically occurring on ridges and south- to-west facing aspects. Patches of oak woodland are generally well connected in networks of ridges and other suitable sites incorporating other fire-dependent communities such as glades and barrens. Oak woodlands are primarily comprised of the Dry Oak Forest and Woodland community. They have open canopies, sparse midstories, and well-developed understories that are typically dominated by grasses and forbs, but also may have a significant woody component. Evidence of fire is common at all stages of the oak woodland restoration process in the form of charred bark and top-killed wood sprouts. Age classes of oak woodland patches are diverse and generally balanced from regenerating up to mature and old growth with overstory ages up to 120 to 200 years or more. The abundance of oak woodlands within this area provides optimal habitat conditions for many species including management indicator species (prairie warbler and northern bobwhite), rare species, and species in demand for hunting such as wild turkey and whitetail deer. Forest communities other than oak woodland are present in a variety of conditions and ages. Water quality in stream systems is excellent, and aquatic communities reflect native diversity. These areas are used by the public for a variety of motorized and non-motorized recreational opportunities.

Currently, the Pleasant Hill Ranger District is in the developmental stages of the Locust Gap Project and would like to invite all comments and/or ideas to help us make the best decisions in managing your Ozark National Forest. From your comments and ideas, resource specialists will develop a draft proposed action for the project area. Once the proposed action is developed, an official scoping letter will be sent out.

Please note that this pre-scoping letter is not considered to be the "official" scoping letter, therefore any comments submitted at this time will also need to be submitted during the official scoping period in order to have legal grounds for objections. Under the new regulations of CFR 218, eligibility to object to an EA is dependent upon the individual's timely comment during an official comment period. An official comment period consists of the 30-day scoping period (*not pre-scoping*) or the 30-day Draft EA period. Specific comments submitted during these official timeframes will allow the individual to be eligible to object. The objection period will be 45 days after the Draft Decision Notice is printed in the Johnson County Graphic, the official paper of record for this project. Should you formally object to the Locust Gap Project, a meeting to address your concerns will be scheduled after the 45-day objection period ends.

We value insight from members of our community and encourage comments or questions regarding the Locust Gap Project. Please feel free to contact our office at (479) 754-2864 with any comments, questions, and/or concerns. Our hours are Monday through Friday, 8:00am to 4:30pm, excluding all federally observed holidays.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Pat Kowalewycz". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the right of the printed name.

PAT KOWALEWYCZ
District Ranger

enclosure: