

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

**REVISED LAND AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT #9 (MISCELLANEOUS  
VEGETATION MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES; FOREST-WIDE STANDARDS WA-1, WA-3, FI-12, AND  
FI-15, FOREST-WIDE OBJECTIVE 4, AND MANAGEMENT AREA STANDARDS  
0.1-4, 0.2-4, 3.1-9, AND 8.2-4)**

**NATIONAL FORESTS IN FLORIDA  
(BAKER, COLUMBIA, FRANKLIN, LAKE, LEON, LIBERTY, MARION, PUTNUM, OKALOOSA, SANTA ROASA, WAKULLA,  
AND WALTON COUNTIES, FLORIDA)**

## DECISION

Based upon my review of the Forest Plan Amendment Environmental Assessment (EA), I have decided to implement Alternative 2 with a modification. I have changed references to managing fire for “resource benefit” to managing fire for “multiple objectives”. This amendment will:

- 1) Update Forest-wide Standard WA-1 to reference the most recent Silviculture Best Management Practices Manual published by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.
- 2) Update Forest-wide Standard WA-3 to allow harvesting within the Primary Water Influence Zone for restoration of functioning ecosystems.
- 3) Update the reference to wildland fire response terminology to comply with Forest Service policy.
- 4) Update Forest-wide Standard FI-12 to incorporate current direction for Federal Wildland Fire Policy on all National Forest System lands.
- 5) Add new Forest-wide Standard FI-15 to incorporate recent national guidelines for aerial delivery of fire retardant or foam near waterways.
- 6) Update Forest-wide Objective 4 describing prescribed burning frequency to clarify that while early to mid-growing season burning is critical, if growing season burns cannot be achieved, the overall fire frequency is the highest priority.
- 7) Update Management Area direction 3.1-9 which limits opening size during treatment of off-site tree species and replace with guidance in the most recent edition of the Scenery Treatment Guide – Southern Regional National Forests.
- 8) Update Management Area direction 0.1-4 and 0.2-4 to reference Forest Service Manual direction for exceptions to the use of motorized equipment in wilderness. This would insure consistency with Forest Service Manual direction.
- 9) Change Management Area direction 8.2-4 to allow for use of fire as a primary management tool for treating sand pine less than 200 acres on a Forest-wide basis. This would allow for more efficient management of larger areas of scrub habitat.
- 10) Incorporate the Chipola Experimental Forest as Management Area 2.2 (Experimental Forest). This would facilitate future management needs on the Experimental Forest which was leased prior to 2004.

## DECISION RATIONALE

The selected alternative will meet the purpose and need by:

- 1) Referencing the most recent Best Management Practices Manual rather than referencing specific years to reduce inconsistencies and potential for following incorrect direction.
- 2) Allowing opportunities for treatment of vegetation within the Primary Influence Zone to reduce artificial buffers from lack of harvesting or fire control around wetlands.
- 3) Providing emphasis for improving overall frequency of fire return interval when growing season burning is not possible.
- 4) Updating wildland fire response terminology to incorporate current direction for Federal Wildland Fire Policy on all National Forest System lands to allow management of wildland fires for other management objectives in areas outside Wilderness.
- 5) Referencing direction from the most recent National Fire Retardant Environmental Assessment to address concerns for effects of fire retardants on sensitive wildlife species.
- 6) Allowing for greater flexibility in treating off-site species within Management Area 3.1 to accomplish restoration efforts and achieve desired conditions.
- 7) Addressing the approval process for exceptions in the Agency's Manual and Handbook directives. Currently, this direction requires the Forest Supervisor to approve mechanized use except for the use of tractors for fire suppression which is approved by the Regional Forester. Since the approval process is strictly an Agency implementation process which may change, it is not needed in the Forest Plan.
- 8) Utilizing fire in isolated sand pine allow for establishment of more efficient and effective burn block boundaries which could also help reduce the amount of fire lines on the forest.
- 9) Allocating the Chipola Experimental Forest to Management Area 2.2 (Experimental Forest) will facilitate future management needs on the Experimental Forest which was leased prior to 2004. The Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 requires National Forest System Lands be maintained using land and resource management plans.

The Revised Land and Resource Management Plan Amendment #9 EA documents the environmental analysis and conclusions upon which this decision is based.

## PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

This action was originally listed as a proposal on the National Forests in Florida Schedule of Proposed Actions in July 2008 and updated periodically during the analysis. The public was invited to review and comment on the proposal through a letter on March 17, 2010 notifying 275 individuals, groups and other agencies of our intention and requesting any comments or potential issues on the proposed.

One significant issue to the original Proposed Action described in the March 17, 2010 scoping notice was identified. This issue related to the proposal to remove Forest-wide Objective 18 (irregular shelterwood harvest). After reviewing the issue it was determined to be more appropriate to address Forest Plan Objectives collectively within the Forest Plan Revision process scheduled for 2012 rather than in this amendment. The original Proposed Action was modified to remove the proposal to amend Forest-wide Objective 18.

Non-significant issues to the Proposed Action included concern for risk management related to use of wildfire for resource benefit, and how wildfire for resource benefit would affect existing prescribed fire objectives on the forest.

Recommendations for two additional items to include in the Proposed Action were made. These recommendations are addressed in Alternatives Considered but not studied in detail.

Comments and responses to public comment received based on the March 17, 2010 scoping notice are summarized in Appendix A of the EA.

An Environmental Assessment was available for a 30-day public review period beginning on June 17, 2010. No comments were received.

## FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision is consistent with the 1999 National Forest Land Management Plan for the National Forests in Florida.

### NFMA Significance:

The Forest Service is currently operating under the November 9, 2000 planning rule and the Interpretive Rule of September 29, 2004. According to 36 CFR 219.35 (and subsequently interpreted in 2004), the responsible official may elect to conduct the plan amendment process under the “1982 planning regulations” (those regulations in effect before November 9, 2000). I have elected to conduct this amendment following the 1982 planning regulations. After reviewing the Environmental Assessment that includes Amendment # 9 to the Forest Plan, I have determined that the decision to implement this amendment will not result in a significant change to the Forest Plan. This determination was made after consulting 16 U.S.C. 1604(f)(4), 36 CFR 219.10(f) (1982 regulations), Forest Service Manual 1926.51 – *Changes to the Land Management Plan that are Not Significant* and FSM 1926.52 – *Changes to the Land Management Plan that are Significant*. Based on these planning requirements, I have determined that:

- 1) This amendment will not significantly alter the levels of goods and services projected by the Forest Plan; nor will it prevent the opportunity to achieve those outputs in later years. The modifications to Forest-wide standard WA-3, and MA 3.1-9 would increase outputs, but would occur in areas that are not part of the scheduled Allowable Sale Quantity. These treatments would be incidental in nature and be designed to meet other resource objectives. Streamside Management Zones affected by WA-3 include up to approximately 3,300 acres and Management area 3.1-9 would include up to approximately 1,700 acres.
- 2) The amendment will not significantly affect the entire plan or a large portion of the planning area. Changes to Streamside Management Zones under WA-3 include up to approximately 3,300 acres. Changes to Management Area 3.1-9 would include up to approximately 1,700 acres. Changes to Management Area 8.2-4 would affect up to 3,000 acres. Cumulatively these changes would affect less than one percent of the forest area.

Changes to Forest-wide standard FI-12 cannot be quantified, but would not likely result in a significant change in the total area burned.

- 3) The remaining changes in standards and guidelines included in this amendment are primarily administrative in nature and would not affect planned outputs or project implementation.

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The significance of environmental impacts must be considered in terms of context and intensity. This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human and national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. In the case of a site-specific action, significance usually depends upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Intensity refers to the severity or degree of impact. (40 CFR 1508.27)

### CONTEXT AND INTENSITY

This amendment would apply to the National Forests in Florida as described in the previous section on NFMA Significance.

The intensity of effects was considered in terms of the following:

1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial.** Consideration of the intensity of environmental effects is not biased by beneficial effects of the action.
2. **The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.** There will be no significant effects on public health and safety because this amendment does not authorize any site specific projects. Any future actions would be evaluated on a site specific basis and documented in an environmental analysis (See EA page 11).
3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because this amendment does not authorize any site specific projects. Any future actions would be evaluated on a site specific basis and documented in an environmental analysis (See EA page 11).
4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known credible scientific controversy over the impacts of the proposed action. In addition, no scientific controversies were identified through public involvement (See EA page 8). My conclusion is based on a review of the 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”. This review complies with the requirement of Best Available Science as described in the 2000 Planning Rule as amended.

5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The Agency has considerable experience with actions like the one proposed. The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. Concern was expressed regarding the potential risk of managed wildland fire to escape control. While risk cannot be eliminated, the guidance for managing wildland fire is believed to allow for the successful use of this tool (See EA page 25).
6. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because this amendment does not authorize any site specific projects. Any future actions would be evaluated on a site specific basis and documented in an environmental analysis (See EA page 11).
7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** The cumulative impacts are not significant. No other past, present or future projects were identified which would combine with the effects of this amendment and result in a cumulative effect on any resources analyzed in this EA. This amendment does not authorize any site specific projects. Any future actions would be evaluated on a site specific basis and documented in an environmental analysis. (See EA page 11, 23)
8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed , or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.** The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources because this amendment does not authorize any site specific projects. Any future actions would be evaluated on a site specific basis and documented in an environmental analysis (See EA page 11).
9. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.** The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973, because this amendment does not authorize any site specific projects. Any future actions would be evaluated on a site specific basis and documented in an environmental analysis (See EA page 11) In addition, the US Fish and Wildlife Service concurred that this amendment would not exceed the scope of activities originally described in the 1999 LRMP and addressed in the accompanying Biological Assessment for the Plan and associated Biological Opinion.
10. **Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.** The action will not violate Federal,

State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (see EA page 23).

After considering the effects of the actions analyzed, in terms of context and intensity, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

## **ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW (APPEAL) OPPORTUNITIES**

For those plan amendments conducted under “1982 planning regulations” the responsible official can elect to use either the “Optional Appeal Procedures Available during the Planning Rule Transition Period” (the former 36 CFR 217 appeal procedures that were in effect prior to November 9, 2000) or the Objection procedures of 36 CFR 219.32 from the 2000 planning rule (see Appendix A to 36 CFR 219.35 [Federal Register, January 10, 2001]). For this decision, I have decided to use the “Optional Appeal Procedures Available during the Planning Rule Transition Period”. These procedures are available at

<http://www.fs.fed.us/emc/applit/includes/PlanAppealProceduresDuringTransition.pdf>

A written appeal must be filed in duplicate, clearly state that it is a Notice of Appeal pursuant to the “Optional Appeal Procedures”, and it must meet the content requirements of Section 9 of the Optional Appeal Procedures. Appeals must be postmarked or received within 45 days after the date the legal notice of this decision is published in the newspaper of record (*Tallahassee Democrat*).

Appeals must be filed with the Regional Forester for the Southern Region at:

USDA Forest Service  
Attn: Appeal Reviewing Officer  
1720 Peachtree Road, NW, Suite 811N  
Atlanta, GA 30309-9102

Appeals may also be faxed to (404) 347-5401 or mailed electronically in a common digital format to [appeals-southern-regional-office@fs.fed.us](mailto:appeals-southern-regional-office@fs.fed.us). Hand-delivered appeals must be received within normal business hours of 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., closed on federal holidays.

Pursuant to Section 10 of the Optional Appeal Procedures, implementation of this decision will not begin until seven calendar days after the legal notice of this decision is published in the newspaper of record. Should any project or activity under this amendment be implemented before an appeal decision can be issued, the Appeal Reviewing Officer will consider written requests to stay implementation of any of those decisions pending completion of the review. To request a stay of implementation, an appellant must file a written request with the Appeal Reviewing Officer, and the request must meet the requirements found in Section 10 of the Optional Appeal Procedures.

The Forest Plan Amendment Project Record is available for public review at the National Forests in Florida Forest Supervisors Office, 325 John Knox Road, Suite F-100, Tallahassee, FL 32303.

Copies of the Environmental Assessment and questions concerning this document can be directed to David Harris, 325 John Knox Road, Suite F-100, Tallahassee, FL 32303 or (850) 523-8582. This amendment is also available on the internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/florida>

## IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Implementation of this decision may occur after seven calendar days following publication of the legal notice of the decision in the Tallahassee Democrat.

## CONTACT

The Forest Plan Amendment Project Record is available for public review at the National Forests in Florida Forest Supervisors Office, 325 John Knox Road, Suite F-100, Tallahassee, FL 32303. Copies of the Environmental Assessment and questions concerning this document can be directed to David Harris, 325 John Knox Road, Suite F-100, Tallahassee, FL 32303 or (850) 523-8582. This amendment is also available on the internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/florida>

/s/ Susan Jeheber-Matthews

10/12/2010

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SUSAN JEHEBER-MATTHEWS

Date

Forest Supervisor



## AMENDED PAGES

The following pages from the 1999 Revised LRMP have been modified based on comments received during public review of the Environmental Assessment.

Deleted language is indicated by a ~~strike through~~. Additions are indicated by **bold** font. Note that some changes to acreage figures and the allocation map in the following pages are the result of updated GIS information and are not the result of this amendment.



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## Amended Forest Plan Page 3-24

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**WA-1** Adhere to standards of Florida's silviculture BMPs. For a detailed discussion of these practices, see the ~~1993~~ **the most recent** *Silviculture Best Management Practices Manual* **published by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.**

**WA-3** Prohibit ~~timber harvesting, including salvage, clearcutting~~ in the Primary Zone, except for sand pine. Harvesting **or other mechanical treatments** ~~done~~ to control the spread of insects **and** diseases **or to restore functioning ecosystems** may occur in the Primary Zone.

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## Amended Forest Plan Page 2-5

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**Objective 4** Prescribe burn on average every 3 years with varied intervals on any given site to restore natural processes in all sites where the natural-fire-return interval was less than 10 years. Strive to burn 50 percent of those acres between March 15 and September 30 and 20 percent between May 1 and July 31. This includes wilderness, wilderness study areas, and the Savannah research natural area. **Growing season burns are critical to habitat enhancement, but if growing season burns cannot be achieved, the overall fire frequency is the highest priority.**

## Amended Forest Plan Page 3-4

The Forest Service responds to every wildland fire on national forests ~~with an appropriate suppression response~~. This response could range from monitoring a non-threatening fire to a full-scale attack of a fire that threatens life, property, and resources. In addition, ~~naturally occurring all wildland fires within wilderness and wilderness study areas~~ may be managed for resource benefit **multiple objectives**, as described in the **most recent publication of the *Guidance for Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy***.

~~Wildland fires in all other areas of the national forests may not be managed for resource benefit; however, the full range of other appropriate suppression responses is available. Fire control lines may consist of roads or natural barriers (such as wetlands), foam or water lines, or bladed, disked or plowed firelines. The Forest Service tries to minimize the use of plowed firelines. The incident commander has full authority to select the appropriate suppression response based on line officer delegation, values at risk, predicted weather, burning conditions, forces available, resource damage potential, and total forest-wide wildland fire situation.~~

**FI-12** Evaluate all ~~naturally occurring wildland fires within wilderness for appropriate response. If the line officer decides to manage the fire for other resource benefit, a wildland fire situation analysis must be prepared along with prescription parameters and respond based on current federal wildland fire policy.~~

**FI-15** Follow the most recent version of the Guidelines for Aerial Delivery of Retardant or Foam Near Waterways. When practical, use water or less toxic fire retardants within occupied T&E habitat and designated or proposed critical wildlife habitat.

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## Amended Forest Plan Page 4-23

**MA 3.1-9** If a restoration project involves the replacement of an off-site tree species, to maintain the visual quality, ~~do not create temporary openings larger than 10 acres.~~ **consider guidance in the most recent edition of the *Scenery Treatment Guide - Southern Regional National Forests*. Site specific projects should also consider long-term benefits of restoration if an area's existing scenic integrity is lower than the planned objective and/or if the area contains visible disturbances that detract from the natural or socially valued appearance.**

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### Amended Forest Plan Page 4-6

Only allow exceptions to the restrictions on the use of motorized equipment and motorized or mechanical vehicles in cases of extreme emergency ~~during wildfire suppression~~ **as described in FSM 2326.** ~~Exceptions can be allowed by District Ranger, except tractor plow use requires Regional Forester approval.~~

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### Amended Forest Plan Page 4-9

Only allow exceptions to the restrictions on the use of motorized equipment and motorized or mechanical vehicles in cases of extreme emergency ~~during wildfire suppression~~ **as described in FSM 2326.** ~~Exceptions can be allowed by District Ranger, except tractor plow use requires Regional Forester approval.~~

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**Amended Forest Plan Page 4-47**

**MA 8.2-4** ~~Do not protect from prescribed fire isolated sand pine stands in Pondered Mosaic Landtype Association that are less than 80 acres.~~



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**Amended Forest Plan Page 3-19**

**VG-7-1 Where isolated sand pine stands less than 200 acres cannot be logically incorporated into larger contiguous areas suitable for scrub habitat, consider fire as a primary management tool where practical. Stands may be isolated by a variety of factors such as dissimilar vegetation, roads, topographic features or administrative boundaries. Locate fire control lines outside of wetland margins to allow for burning across ecotones.**

## Amended Forest Plan Page 4-18

### Management Area 2.2 Experimental Forest

Osceola NF	293 acres in LTA 1
	2,509 acres in LTA 5
Apalachicola NF	<u>940 acres in Sandhills LTA</u>
<b>Total Acres</b>	<b>3,742 acres</b>

VQO = 25% Partial Retention, 50% Modification, & 25% Maximum Modification  
 ROS = 100% Rural  
 All acres unsuitable for timber production

#### 2.2-Goal

To provide lands for conducting research to achieve the goals and objectives of the Southern Research Station.

#### 2.2-Desired Future Condition

In this area, alteration of the landscape is readily apparent and occurs primarily through human intervention. Vegetation patterns are the result of timber harvests that create many openings (varying from small to large) in the forest canopy. Once in a while the visitor sees the effects of natural disturbances (fires, storms, insects, and diseases). Snags and lightning-struck trees are seen occasionally. Most of the tree trunks are blackened to various degrees. Evidence of firelines around previous fires is encountered at a moderate rate. In addition, the landscape may be interrupted by narrow road corridors. Remnants of roads leading from permanent roads to openings can be seen. Evidence of research activities—in the form of signs, stakes, tree tags, and paint on trees—is often seen.

The ecosystem is primarily mesic flatwoods, with strand swamp inclusions **or sandhills**. In flatwoods, dominant trees are a mix of longleaf and slash pine, and saw palmetto dominates the understory. **Sandhills are dominated by longleaf pine with a wiregrass understory.** The appearance of the pine forest may vary from somewhat open and parklike in the oldest stands to closed and dense in the younger stands. From one location to the next, trees may vary in size. In some stands, trees are uniformly spaced in rows, but other stands may show random distribution of the trees. Green stumps may be found throughout the forest.

Wildlife species are those that tolerate a certain amount of human disturbance and live in predominantly longleaf pine forests.

The quality of water, soil, and air is high. Roads are common, and some are easily passable.

Visitors are not isolated from the sights and sounds of human activity. They may encounter other people. There are few trails and no recreational facilities, though there may be interpretive displays.

The low-standard roads have native surfacing and conform in height to the surrounding ground. Some low-drainage points along these roads (bay crossing, streams, etc.) have low-water rock crossings. Travel with low-clearance vehicles is difficult. Some higher-standard roads have sand-clay surfacing, are higher than the surrounding ground, and have ditches. Drainage structures consist of culverts. Roads may not be stable during bad weather conditions. A few roads have paved surfaces and are stable and smooth.