DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Longleaf Ecosystem Restoration Project, National Forests in Alabama, Conecuh National Forest, Covington and Escambia Counties, AL

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

SUMMARY: Forest Service will prepare an Environmental Impact Statement on a proposal to emphasize expansion of the longleaf ecosystem across the Conecuh National Forest in a systematic five-year program involving:

1. Restoration cuts (regeneration) of 2,334 acres of off-site trees to restore 64 sites to the native longleaf pine/wiregrass ecosystem.
2. Thinning (intermediate cuts) of 1,939 acres of off-site trees (mostly slash pine) on about 56 sites to promote future conversion to the longleaf pine/wiregrass ecosystem.

DATES: Comments concerning this analysis should be received in writing by June 22, 1998.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to: District Ranger, Conecuh NF, Route 5, Box 157, Andalusia, Alabama 36420.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Gary Taylor, District Ranger, Robert Taylor, Silviculturist, Debbie Foley, NEPA Coordinator, Rick Lint, Wildlife Biologist, Telephone number: 334–222–2555, FAX Number: 334–222–6485.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

A. The Proposal

1. Restoration cut (regenerate) 2,334 acres to restore 64 sites from off-site trees (mostly slash pine) to the native longleaf pine/wiregrass ecosystem. Priority will be given to retaining existing longleaf pines on these sites.
2. Thin (intermediate cut) 1,939 acres of off-site trees (mostly slash pine) of 56 sites to favor and promote future conversion to the native longleaf pine/wiregrass ecosystem.
3. Re-establish restoration cut areas with longleaf pine seedlings within five years of cutting. Site preparation would include drum chopping and burning and/or chemical site prep and burning and/or shearing and windrowing of residual brush and logging slash. The type of site preparation prescribed for each site will be the least intensive treatment needed to insure survival of the planted longleaf seedlings.

B. Needs for the Proposal

1. Restore the longleaf pine/sandhills ecosystem to provide more suitable (preferred) habitat for the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) to aid in recovery. RCW is an endangered species.
2. Return acreage occupied by other tree species to native longleaf pine and promote recovery of the longleaf ecosystem.
3. Establish a systematic program to aid in longleaf ecosystem restoration.
4. Implement the goals and objectives of the Forest Plan. Specifically, to protect habitat and improve conditions for threatened, endangered and sensitive species occurring on National Forest lands

C. Nature and Scope of the Decision To Be Made

Whether, and to what extent to, implement an accelerated program of restoring sites to longleaf pine and associated understory species. Historically, these sites were part of the longleaf pine/sandhills ecosystem but now contain off-site species that were artificially introduced.

In the late 1960's and early 1970's regeneration of longleaf pine was difficult and often unsuccessful. Longleaf is more difficult to plant than other southern pines and most research on growing longleaf has only been done in recent years. Currently, about 13,000 acres (about 23%) of native longleaf pine sites on the Conecuh National Forest are forested in slash, loblolly, and in some cases sand pine. Of this, about 10,000 acres were planted to other species (now considered off-site) and about 3,000 acres reverted due to exclusion of fire from an ecosystem that evolved with and, is dependent on, fire. With the exclusion of fire, less tolerant species flourished in the Conecuh National Forest. The longleaf pine/sandhills ecosystem once encompassed some 90+ million acres ranging from Southern Virginia to East Texas. This acreage has been reduced to less than 3 million acres today due to conversion of forests to agriculture and urban areas, as well as conversion to other species.

Beginning in 1987, through applied research, the availability of containerized seedlings, and experience, managers became very successful at planting longleaf pine with the expectation of adequate survival. Seedling survival on the Conecuh National Forest now averages about 90%.

Many sensitive, threatened, and endangered plants and animals depend on this ecosystem for survival of their species. The staff of the Conecuh National Forest is committed to restoring this ecosystem on the native sites best suited to this important forest ecosystem.

D. Proposed Scoping Process

The scoping period associated with this NOI will be thirty (30) days in length, beginning the day after publication of this notice. A public tour will be held on June 5 and 6 from 9 am until 1 pm. These tours are intended to show interested individuals a few of the sites proposed for treatment, as well as similar sites that have been treated in the past few years. These tours will serve as the public scoping meeting.

Scoping for this proposal began in February 1997 when initial information was shared with the public and plans were to document the analysis in an Environmental Analysis. The proposal has been refined since that time and some preliminary issues and alternatives have been developed (and are included in this notice). A decision to proceed with an Environmental Impact Statement has been made due to potential effects for the RCW and the possible need for Formal Consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service (USDI). Thus, an additional scoping period is being conducted at this time.

The Conecuh National Forest is seeking additional information, comments, and assistance from Federal, State, and local agencies and other individuals or organizations who may be interested in or affected by the proposed action. This input will be used in preparation of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The scoping process includes:

1. Identifying potential issues.
2. Identifying issues to be analyzed in depth.
3. Eliminating insignificant issues or those which have been covered by a relevant previous environmental analysis.
4. Exploring additional alternatives.
5. Identifying potential environmental effects of the proposed action and alternatives.

A. Preliminary Issues Identified to Date Include

1. What impacts will the release of woody/brushy understory vegetation resulting from thinning treatments have on the efforts to restore historic longleaf ecosystem understory?
2. Can the existing longleaf ecosystem understory species be protected and maintained during implementation of the silviculture treatments (cutting and site preparation)? Currently, many of these stands have a desirable understory and care should be taken to tailor site preparation methods so as to preserve this understory.
3. What short and long-term impacts will there be on the recreational

experience along the Conecuh Trail? Five stands proposed for cutting are visible from the trail and concern exists to protect the scenic value along the trail.

4. Do the long-term benefits of this project to Conecuh National Forest ecosystem restoration efforts justify the costs of reforestation at this time? Short-term economic impacts of the proposed action verses the ecological benefits of the restoration was questioned.

5. Can off-site treatments to restore the longleaf ecosystem be implemented in order to have long-term (and possible short-term) benefits to the red-cocked woodpecker (RCW) while having no negative impacts to the existing RCW population?

6. Long-term ecological concerns/benefits need to take priority over economic incentives. A concern was raised that economic benefits and support of the timber industry should be secondary to long-term ecological needs.

7. Impacts of timber harvest to recreational uses (other than the Conecuh Trail).

8. Importance of downed logs for rare amphibians, especially near known dusky gopher frog breeding ponds.

9. Protection of soil and water resources.

10. Scope/size of the project (whether an EIS might be needed instead of an EA).

11. Fragmentation (concern not to increase).

12. Early successional age class direction in the Land Management Plan (LMP). According to the LMP, early successional habitat should range from a minimum of 6% to a maximum of 17% per habitat unit.

13. Big Bay (Bear Bay) roadless criteria.

14. Cumulative effects. Whether cumulative effects could be adequately evaluated with a project of this magnitude.

B. Possible Alternatives Identified to Date Include

1. No Action: This alternative will serve as a baseline for comparison of alternatives. This alternative will be fully developed and analyzed.

2. Proposed Action: As listed above, this alternative would include a five-year systematic program of thinning and restoration cuts, including site preparation methods proven to result in fully stocked stands of free to grow seedlings in three to five years after cutting is complete.

3. Modified Proposed Action that takes a more conservative approach to longleaf ecosystem restoration with fewer restoration cuts and more thinning. Age class distributions relevant to existing RCW guidance would be given more consideration than long-term ecosystem needs.

4. Follow our normal order of entry into compartments as recommended in the Forest Land Management Plan. This would result in treatment of approximately 78% of the original proposal and reduce the scope of the project.

5. Modified proposed action that is more sensitive to the economic impacts of establishing the new longleaf stands. The majority of the timber to be sold from the regeneration and thinning is pulpwood, thus expected revenues will not cover the cost of site preparation and planting of longleaf in the areas. This alternative will assess ways to reduce the cost of reforestation. This would be accomplished by: (a) Reducing the minimum acceptable stocking per acre; (b) reducing the number of trees planted per acre; (c) reducing acceptable survival rates; and (d) doing the minimum site preparation to accomplish (a). This alternative will also look at other possible funding sources for planting. For example, the National Forest Foundation and American Forests Global Re-Leaf program are two possible non-governmental funding sources that have provided funding in the past. Also, a national initiative for ecosystem restoration funding would fit this project nicely and help in the funding to establish the new stands of longleaf.

6. Treat every known off-site stand (approximately 13,000 acres) by either thinning or restoring to longleaf at this time.

7. Modified Proposed Action that places more emphasis on RCW areas in the Boggy Hollow area and on the western side of the CNF.

8. Modified Proposed Action that would drop all proposed treatments for compartments 34 and 48. This was previously identified on the RARE II inventory (Big Bay).

9. Uneven-age Management. Consider whether the purpose and need could be accomplished with this management regime.

C. Special Permit Needs

There are no special permits required from any State or Federal agencies in order to implement this project.

D. Lead Agency

The USDA Forest Service is the lead agency for this project. The Fish and Wildlife Service (USDI) has been involved with this proposal since inception and will continue to be throughout this analysis. Formal consultation may be required in order to implement one or more of the alternatives.

The Conecuh Ranger District requests that comments be as specific as possible for this proposal and be sent to: District Ranger Gary L. Taylor, USDA, Forest Service, Route 5 Box 157, Andalusia, Alabama 36420.

It is estimated that the draft EIS will be available for public comment by August 15, 1998. It is very important that those interested in this proposed action participate at this time. To be helpful, comments on the DEIS should be as specific as possible and may address the adequacy of the statement or the merits of the alternatives discussed (see the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act at 40 CFR 1503.3).

In addition, Federal court decisions have established that reviewers of DEIS's must structure their participation in the environmental review of the proposal so that it is meaningful and alerts the agency to the reviewers' position and contentions: *Vermon Yankee Nuclear Power Corp.* v. *NRDC*, 435 U.S. 519, 553 (1978). Environmental objections that could have been raised at the draft stage may be waived if not raised until after completion of the final environmental impact statement (FEIS). *City of Angoon* v. *Hodel*, 803 F.2d 1016, 1022 (9th Cir. 1986) and *Wisconsin Heritages, Inc.* v. *Harris*, 490 F. Supp. 1334, 1338 (E.D. Wis. 1980). The reason for this is to ensure that substantive comments and objections are made available to the Forest Service at a time when it can meaningfully consider them and respond to them in the FEIS.

Estimated Date for FEIS

After the comment period ends on the DEIS, the comments will be analyzed, considered, and responded to by the Forest Service in preparing the FEIS. The final is scheduled to be completed by November 1998. The responsible official will consider the comments, responses, environmental consequences discussed in the final supplement, applicable laws, regulations, and policies in making a decision regarding this proposal. The responsible official will document the decision and reasons for the decision in the Record of Decision. That decision will be subject to appeal under 36 CFR 215. The responsible official for this project will be Gary L. Taylor, District Ranger for the Conecuh Ranger District, National Forests in Alabama at: Route 5 Box 157, Andalusia, Alabama 36420.

Dated: May 15, 1998.

Gary L. Taylor,

District Ranger.

[FR Doc. 98–13544 Filed 5–20–98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–52–M

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of meeting.

SUMMARY: The National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council will meet in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, June 4–6, 1998. The purpose of the meeting is to review the status of the Council's annual report, continue discussion on emerging issues in Urban and Community Forestry, and determine the grant categories for the 1999 Challenge Cost-Share grant program.

DATES: The meeting will be held June 4–6, 1998.

ADDRESSES: The meeting will be held at the Shilo Inn, 702 W. Appleway, Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. A tour of local projects will be available June 4, 9:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m.

Individuals who wish to speak at the meeting or to propose agenda items must send their names and proposals to Suzanne M. del Villar, Executive Assistant, National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council, 1042 Park West Court, Glenwood Springs, CO 81601.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Suzanne M. del Villar, Cooperative Forestry Staff, (970) 928–9264.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Challenge Cost-Share grant categories, identified by the Council, are advertised annually to solicit proposals for projects to advance the knowledge of, and promote interest in, urban and community forestry. Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 552b(c)(9)(B), the meeting will be closed from approximately 8:30 to 10:00 a.m. on June 6 in order for the Council to determine the categories for the 1999 Challenge Cost-Share grant program. Otherwise, the meeting is open to the public

Person who wish to bring urban and community forestry matters to the attention of the Council may file written statements with the Council staff before or after the meeting. Public input sessions will be provided and individuals, who have made written requests by May 22, will have the opportunity to address the Council at those sessions. Council discussion is limited to Forest Service staff and Council members.

Dated: May 15, 1998.

Dan Glickman,

Secretary, Department of Agriculture.

[FR Doc. 98–13598 Filed 5–20–98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–11–M

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Natural Resources Conservation Service

Maricopa-Stanfield Watershed, Pinal County, Arizona

AGENCY: Natural Resources Conservation Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of availability of finding of no significant impact.

SUMMARY: Pursuant to section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969; the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (40 CFR part 1500); and the Natural Resources Conservation Service Regulations (7 CFR part 650); the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, gives notice that an environmental impact statement is not being prepared for the Maricopa-Stanfield Watershed, Pinal County, Arizona.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Michael Somerville, State Conservation, Natural Resources Conservation Service, 3003 North Central Avenue, Suite 800, Phoenix, Arizona, 85012. Telephone: (602) 280–8808.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The environmental assessment of this federally assisted action indicated that the project will not cause significant local, regional, or national impacts on the environmental. As a result of these findings, Michael Somerville, State Conservation, has determined that the preparation and review of an environmental impact statement are not needed for this project.

The project purposes are agricultural water management and includes a mixture of land treatment and management practices to conserve irrigation water. The planned works of improvement include irrigation land leveling, suitable irrigation water conveyance, structures for turnouts and water measurement for irrigation water management, and plant, and fertility management practices (not cost-shared) including irrigation water management, crop residue use, conservation cropping sequence, appropriate erosion control practices as needed, nutrient management and pest management.

The Notice of a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) has been forwarded to the Environmental Protection Agency and to various Federal, State, and local agencies and interested parties. A limited number of copies of the FONSI are available to fill single copy requests at the above address. Basic data developed during the environmental assessment are on the file and may be reviewed by contacting Don Paulus, at (602) 280–8780.

No administrative action on implementation of the proposal will be taken until 30 days after the date of this publication in the **Federal Register**.

(This activity is listed in the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance under NO. 10.904, Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention, and is subject to the provisions of Executive Order 12372, which requires intergovernmental consultation with State and local officials.)

Dated: May 8, 1998.

Michael Somerville,

State Conservation.

[FR Doc. 98–13597 Filed 5–20–98; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–16–M

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rural-Business Cooperative Service

Notice of Request for Information Collection

AGENCY: Rural Business-Cooperative Service, USDA.

ACTION: Proposed collection; Comments requested.

SUMMARY: In accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, this notice announces the Rural Business-Cooperative Service's intention to request a reinstatement of an information collection in support of the program for ''Rural Development Loan Servicing.''

DATES: Comments on this notice must be received by July 20, 1998, to be assured of consideration.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: David W. Lewis, Loan Specialist, Rural Business-Cooperative Service, USDA, Stop 3224, 1400 Independence Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20250–3224, Telephone: (202) 690–0797.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Title: Rural Development Loan Servicing.

OMB Number: 0570–0015.

Expiration Date of Approval: April 30, 1998.

Type of Request: Reinstatement of Information Collection.

Abstract: This regulation is for servicing and liquidating loans made by