

# Chapter 1 : Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action

## INTRODUCTION

The Armuchee Ridges analysis area that is the subject of this environmental assessment (EA) is within Forest Service Region 8 (Southern Region) and is part of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests which is comprised of approximately 865,000 acres in Georgia. The Armuchee Ridges project is located on the Conasauga Ranger District which contains 172,297 acres of National Forest lands. The Armuchee Ridges analysis area contains approximately 64,656 acres previously managed as a separate administrative unit, the Armuchee Ranger District. The District Ranger for the Conasauga Ranger District is the line officer who has the responsibility and authority for conducting analyses, preparing necessary documentation and making decisions on proposed actions under his/her jurisdiction.

## BACKGROUND

The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest initiated a large scale assessment of the Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District in November 2005 to identify opportunities for vegetation management projects consistent with management goals and objectives of the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. This effort involved staff from the Ranger District and Supervisors Office and focused on identifying forest health and ecosystem restoration activities with a dual outcome of improving or maintaining wildlife habitats.

Forest Service staff completed an initial field assessment of stands located within Forest Plan Management Prescriptions that identified vegetation management objectives. An initial public meeting was held in April 2006, inviting interested publics to participate in the large scale assessment process. The April 2006 meeting presented a 5 year program of work involving fourteen (14) Forest Plan objectives that could occur on 18,475 acres. The objectives emphasized forest health, restoration of forest ecosystems, and creation of declining natural communities needed to support viable populations of native and desired non-native plants, wildlife and fisheries. Field trips were held on the Cohutta portion of the District to discuss the various objectives being evaluated and potential effects of the silvicultural treatments. Two field trips were completed to Forest Service research units in North Carolina (Bent Creek and Coweeta) to address the specific public concerns of silviculture of Appalachian hardwoods and riparian area management.

The opportunities identified in the large scale assessment were developed into a proposed action and scoped to the public for comments as the Armuchee-Cohutta Thinning and Restoration Projects in December 2006. Based on comments and further consideration the proposed action was modified by the District Ranger to defer the proposals on the Cohutta portion of the District as they needed further examination before they could be considered "ripe for decision."

**SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTION**

The Conasauga District Ranger, Michele H. Jones, proposed the following resource management activities for the Armuchee Ridges project.

**Table 1-1. Proposed Action Activities**

<b>PROPOSED ACTIVITY</b>	<b>APPROXIMATE NET MEASURE</b>	<b>IMPLEMENTATION YEAR RANGE</b>
<b>Restoration – longleaf pine and shortleaf pine forests</b>	<b>607 acres</b>	<b>2008-2015</b>
<b>Restoration &amp; maintenance of oak or oak/pine forests</b>	<b>512 acres</b>	<b>2008-2015</b>
<b>Restoration of riparian hardwood forests</b>	<b>54 acres</b>	<b>2008-2015</b>
<b>Commercial thinning of pine stands</b>	<b>5,249 acres</b>	<b>2008-2015</b>
<b>Pre-commercial thinning of pine stands</b>	<b>350 acres</b>	<b>2008-2015</b>
<b>Construction of temporary roads</b>	<b>23.2 miles</b>	<b>2008-2015</b>

**PROJECT LOCATION**

The analysis area for the Armuchee Ridges project is composed of Compartments 915, 916, 917, 918, 922, 923, 924, 925, 927, 928, 929, 931, 932, 933, 935, 939, 940, 943, 946, and 952. Geographically, the project area is located west and southwest of Dalton, Georgia, due west of Interstate 75 within Chattooga, Floyd, Gordon Walker and Whitfield Counties. The general boundaries of this area are Taylor Ridge to the west and GA Highway 136 to the north and east. There are a few treatment areas south of US Highway 27. The major roads of the project area are West Armuchee, East Armuchee, Hammond Gap, and Pocket roads. The Ridge and Valley Scenic Byway and the Pinhoti Trail traverse the project area. The area is contained within ten (10) unnamed sixth level hydrologic units that are drainages of the Coosa-Tallapoosa river basins.

**FOREST PLAN DIRECTION**

Treatments described for the Armuchee Ridges Project are consistent with the 2004 Forest Plan goals. The Desired Conditions and standards for the applicable Management Prescriptions for the project area Forest Plan are displayed in Table 1-2 below. Treatments and environmental effects are typical of those projected for implementation in the Forest Plan and analyzed in the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Forest Plan (FEIS) (FEIS, USDA Forest Service, 2004).

**Table 1-2 – Relevant Planning Direction**

Management Prescription	Reference
6.D. Core Areas of Old Growth Surrounded by Areas with Extended Forest Rotations	Forest Plan, Chapter 3, Pages 3-109 to 3-113
7.A – Scenic Byway Corridors	Forest Plan, Chapter 3, Pages 3-114 to 3-118
7.E.1 – Dispersed Recreation Areas	Forest Plan, Chapter 3, Pages 3-123 to 3-125
7.E.2 – Dispersed Recreation Areas with Vegetation Management	Forest Plan, Chapter 3, Pages 3-126 to 3-129
9.H – Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Plant Associations	Forest Plan, Chapter 3, Pages 3-167 to 3-170
11 – Riparian Corridors	Forest Plan, Chapter 3, Pages 3-171 to 3-182

Proposed actions for the Armuchee Ridges Project are proposed for a phased implementation schedule beginning in fiscal year 2008 (a fiscal year is the period October 1 to September 30). Timber harvest activities could be expected to commence during the fall of 2008 and continue in phases for a period of 5 to 7 years. Site preparation activities on stands to be restored to longleaf, shortleaf or oak oak/pine would commence with completion of harvest activities and continue for a period of 2 to 3 years. In stands where restoration activities are proposed, release activities would take 3 to 5 years after site preparation and planting activities.

**NEED FOR THE ACTION**

Contrasts between existing and desired Management Prescription conditions aid the Interdisciplinary team in discovery of possible and probable need of proposed management activities. Those management activities (proposed actions) determined to be within the scope of analysis were generated from those contrasts.

**Table 1-3 Desired Condition versus Existing Condition**

Desired Condition “Objective”	Existing Condition	Site Specific Need	Management Activity
Enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types. (Forest Plan, 2004, Goal 3, pg 2-6)	<u>Objective 3.5</u> – Native Longleaf pine and shortleaf pine, have disappeared from the Armuchee Ridges due to insect damage and loss of habitat	Restore oak and oak-pine in off-site pine stands by timber harvest followed by prescribed burning to enhance oak composition - 512 acres – restoration, 155 acres – maintenance	Commercial timber harvest, prescribed burning, planting

Desired Condition “Objective”	Existing Condition	Site Specific Need	Management Activity
Enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types. (Forest Plan, 2004, Goal 3, pg 2-6)	<u>Objective 3.6</u> – oak and oak-pine sites are occupied by pines or undesired hardwoods	Restore sites ecologically suitable to montane longleaf or shortleaf in mixtures with hardwood species (607 acres – longleaf, 30 acres-shortleaf)	Commercial timber harvest, prescribed burning, planting, release & prescribed burning
Enhance, restore, manage and create habitats as required for wildlife and plant communities, including disturbance-dependent forest types. (Forest Plan, 2004, Goal 3, pg 2-6)	Objective 3.7 – oak/pine forests contain too much Virginia or loblolly pine	Reduce density of stands by commercial thinning of pines (26 acres) and pre-commercial thinning (129 acres)	Commercial timber harvest, pre-commercial thinning
Restore formerly existing old-growth community types (composition, not structure) where ecologically appropriate. (Forest Plan, 2004, Goal 21, pg 2-17)	Existing hardwood stand in riparian corridor needs species selection to enhance habitat and restore old growth type - riverfront forest	Release of bottomland hardwood trees in riparian corridor stand (54 acres)	Prescribed burning and/or hand tool cutting release of desired crop trees
Through appropriate management, reduce populations of native and non-native pest species or vulnerability to them (Forest Plan, 2004, Goal 40, pg 2-39)	Over-crowded pine stands at risk for insect and disease attack, particularly southern pine beetle.	Improve forest health by thinning of loblolly pine stands (5,249 acres) or pre-commercial thinning of pine stands (350 acres)	Commercial timber harvest – thinning or pre-commercial thinning

**PURPOSE OF THE ACTION**

The purpose or goal of the Armuchee Ridges Thinning and Restoration Project is to propose management activities that would meet or strive toward the desired condition(s) objectives, stated as a site specific need, as identified in the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan for Management Prescriptions 6D, 7.E.1, 7.E.2, 9.H, and 11.

## **SCOPE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS**

On December 20, 2006, District Ranger Michelle H. Jones, sent to the public scoping letter for the project to approximately 50 individuals and organizations and posted it to the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest Planning website. Twelve (12) responses were received. This scoping letter was the culmination of a period of collaboration, discussions, public meetings, field trips and analysis between the Forest Service and interested individuals and organizations to evaluate the potential for vegetation management opportunities on the Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District to implement the objectives of the 2004 Forest Plan.

The intent of public involvement is to determine the scope of analysis for the proposed action, encourage public understanding and participation, become aware and responsive to values of the public, have a foundation from which to evaluate how the public could be affected, and improve public participation in land and resource decision-making.

This proposal has also been identified in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests' "Schedule of Proposed Actions", published quarterly by the Forests.

## **RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL AND DECISIONS TO BE MADE**

The Conasauga District Ranger of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests is the Responsible Official for the Armuchee Ridges decision. Given the information collected to date, the District Ranger determined an EA is the appropriate format for documenting the possible environmental impacts of proposed actions. This determination was based on a review of existing resource information and issues. The Conasauga District Ranger or designated representative will answer the following questions based on the environmental analysis:

- Will the proposed action proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative or not at all?
- If it proceeds, what mitigation measures and monitoring requirements will be implemented?

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT – ISSUE IDENTIFICATION**

A scoping letter detailing the proposed projects was sent to xx individuals on December 20, 2006. (The project file includes a list of all agencies, persons and organizations contacted in the course of scoping and environmental analysis.) In addition, the proposal appeared in the quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. The purpose of soliciting comments during the scoping period is to determine if there are any significant issues on the proposed action. Not all issues are significant issues.

On site meetings were held with individuals and representatives of the Forest Service, Georgia Department of Natural Resources – Wildlife Resources Division, Georgia Forest

Watch, Quail Unlimited, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in February 2007 to clarify project proposals for longleaf restoration. A public meeting was held at Dalton College on May 31, 2007 to review comments, issues and the proposed action.

An interdisciplinary team (IDT) was formed in March 2007 composed of the following Forest Service employees: Mike Murphy (Silviculture), Ruth Stokes (Wildlife), Charlene Breeden (Hydrology), Dick Rightmyer (Soils & IDT Leader), John Mayer (Heritage Resources), Cindy Wentworth (Botanist), Carolyn Hoffman (Visuals), Deb Byrd (Transportation), Ron Stephens (Silviculture) and Kate Metzger (Hydrology trainee).

### **Significant Issues**

Significant issues are unresolved conflicts or disputes regarding effects of the Proposed Action that, because of their extent, duration, or intensity, are used to formulate alternatives to the Proposed Action, prescribe mitigation measures, and/or serve as the focus for a comparison of environmental effects between alternatives. One significant issue was identified for the project EA as follows:

#### **Issue: Harvesting of Mature Oak**

**Issue Statement:** Harvesting as proposed would remove mature oaks causing an impact to wildlife habitat by reducing hard mast production.

**Background:** Fruits and nuts from trees provide important forage for wildlife species and are referred to as mast. Oak trees are an important source of hard mast in the Armuchee Ridges project area. This project includes proposals to restore species such as longleaf pine and shortleaf pine, which are not tolerant of shade. In order to achieve restoration objectives, mature oak trees would need to be removed because they create shade. Concerns were raised that harvesting as proposed would remove enough mature oak to impact mast production, which would have a negative impact on wildlife habitat.

**Measurement:** Changes in mast production (pounds/acre)

#### **Other Issues**

A worksheet documenting this determination can be found in the project file. These other issues were identified by the ID Team as other issues because of one or more of the following conditions:

- The issue is outside the scope of the proposal.
- The issue is already decided by law or in the Forest Plan.
- The issue is not in conflict with the proposed action.
- The issue is not supported by scientific evidence.
- The issue is limited in duration, extent or intensity.