Dear Interested Citizen,

Pursuant to provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), I am requesting comments on a proposal to prescribe burn 798 acres in compartment 217 (Tibwin Tract) on the Francis Marion National Forest as summarized in Table 1.

**Purpose and Need for Project**

This project would reintroduce fire back into the Tibwin Tract reducing fuel accumulations, simulating historical fire regimes and reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire. The Forest Service acquired the South Tibwin Tract in 1993 and North Tibwin in 1995. There is no recent burn history.

Dense understory woody vegetation has created ladder fuels to reach into the canopy and jackpot fuel loadings that cause high intensity fire behavior leading to high severity fire during a low humidity/windy day, increasing the potential for large intense wildfires.

**Table 1 – Existing Vegetation and Fuel Loadings present in Tibwin Tract**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Existing Vegetation Types are High</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Fuel Loadings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loblolly pine-hardwood</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>8 tons/acre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loblolly pine</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>14 tons/acre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longleaf pine</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14 tons/acre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottomland hardwood-yellow pine</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>7 tons/acre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife Openings</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>2-4 tons/acre</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Desired Condition**

Low intensity, entry level burns are prescribed to reduce fuel loadings by 2-4 tons/acre. A medium fuel loading (approximately 2 to 8 tons per acre) for each vegetation type is desired for the initial burn followed by periodic subsequent fires to reduce and/or maintain fuel loadings to low (2 to 3 tons per acre).

**Proposed Action**

The Francis Marion National Forest is proposing to use prescribed fire (see attached Tibwin Tract Burn map and Table) to meet objectives in support of the *Final Revised Land and Resource Management Plan, Francis Marion National Forest* (LMP).

The Tibwin Tracts would have an initial dormant or growing season burn to reduce the fuel loadings. To encourage a mosaic of burn affects, hand ignition is planned while still achieving fuel reductions. All burning would be conducted under predetermined weather conditions and with an adequate number of trained personnel to minimize the chance of escape and to prevent damage to soil and water resources. Prescribed burn plan would be prepared prior to a burn and
would specify burn parameters necessary for the units (wind direction, relative humidity, and temperature), and include a map, contingency map and complexity analysis.

Prescribed burning of these units would take place beginning this year and continue over the next 2 to 3 years. Existing roads and natural topographic features (streams and water bodies) are used as control lines. No constructed dozer lines are needed.

**Table 2 Tibwin Prescribe Burn Project on Francis Marion National Forest**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Burn Unit</th>
<th>Burn Acres</th>
<th>Miles of dozer line to construct</th>
<th>Miles of dozer line to refurbish</th>
<th>Burning for Restoration or Maintenance?</th>
<th># of RCW Clusters within ½ mile of the Burn Unit*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Tibwin A</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tibwin B</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tibwin C</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tibwin D</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tibwin E</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tibwin F</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Tibwin G</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Tibwin A</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Tibwin B</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Restoration</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>798</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>Restoration</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Suitable habitat within a ½ mile of a cluster center is counted as foraging habitat according to the RCW Recovery Plan (USFWS 2003).

**Forest Plan Consistency**

The proposal is consistent with the following LMP objective:

**OBJ-ECO-2. Frequent Prescribed Fire for Ecosystem Maintenance or Restoration**

*Prescribed Fire-Base level:* Apply prescribed fire on at least 30,000 acres per year to maintain or restore fire-adapted ecosystems including longleaf pine woodlands, savannas and flatwoods, Carolina bays and depression ponds, and narrow river floodplains and swamps. Include at least 4,500 acres of those 30,000 acres (or approximately 15%) as growing season burns (April 1 – September 30) annually.

Specific sections of the LMP referenced here are the Desired Conditions at the Forestwide Scale Desired Conditions of Management Area 2 (DC-MA2) and Desired Conditions of Coastal Resource Integration Zone Coastal (DC-Z-Coastal). Prescribed burning improves habitat for numerous plants and animals and specifically addresses desired conditions listed in Sections 3.1.2 Species Diversity and 2.2.2 Species Diversity (At-Risk Species).

- Desired conditions (DC): A fire-adapted/resilient longleaf/loblolly pine ecosystem that is sustainable with regeneration and recruitment of overstory species while promoting an open pine stand with grass understory. Emphasis on providing greater wildfire protection from catastrophic wildfires DC-MA2, DC-RIZ-Coastal.

Objectives for Management Area 2 (OBJ-MA2): Reintroduce a low-intensity prescribed fire, which instills resiliency, on the landscape to reduce accumulated fuel loadings and provide greater protection in the event of a catastrophic wildfire. Improve the Fire Regime Condition Class (FRCC) closer to historic disturbance levels.

Standards: Break the landscape up into smaller burn blocks to offer a mosaic of options and burn cycles. The landscape is not treated as one burn block but broken up into pieces so the whole tract is not burned all-at-once while re-introducing fire to this unique landscape ecosystem (see Tibwin Burn Blocks).

Guidelines (G#): G12 to G18 reduce impacts to soil and water quality primarily from firelines construction/rehabilitation.

Management Areas: Management Area 2

Geographic Areas (Resource Integration Zones): Coastal Resource Integration Zone (Coastal RIZ): Cpt. 217 FS lands represents 14% of this zone. Foraging areas within the longleaf/loblolly pine ecosystem for RCW’s and active clusters in Compartment 217. Within 0.5 miles of Little Wambaw Swamp Wilderness area. Watershed Area: Bulls Bay

Distinctive Roles and contributions within the broader landscape: Successful prescribed burning in this unit will open up more opportunities to burn similar landscapes along the Hwy 17 corridor. With this being such a popular location for birders and general naturalists, the effects of the prescribed burn in the area will bolster a more positive attitude of the public and encourage more burning in the future while improving viewsheds.


Social Benefits: Protecting a scenic, historic and culturally important landscape from the effects of a catastrophic wildfire. One-hundred percent of this area is in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Sustaining traditional hunting grounds and ecotourism thru bird watching by managing a part of South Carolina’s Lowcountry landscape. There are 5.1 miles of public hiking trails in the unit. Promoting a Firewise practice in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and protecting scenic, historic and cultural landscapes in the event of a catastrophic wildfire. Tibwin Plantation House as well as the North and South Tibwin tracts were nominated to the National Register District. The Tibwin National Register District showcases one of the oldest coastal plantations in the St. James Santee Parish surrounded by open fields, a series of water impoundments ideal for birding and hunting, and an extensive trail system. This historic district connects to local county parks and the East Coast Greenway, so visitors can easily move from one to other. Restored ecosystems enhance the historic character of these sites.

Suitability: Promote sustainable pine ecosystem with potential benefit of timber production on National Forest Lands. Promoting outdoor recreation opportunities on the trail use and special-use hunting area.

Partnership opportunities or coordination activities: Seek out potential partners for an ‘all lands’ approach and collaborate with the use of Wyden Agreements, MOU’s, etc.
Strengthen partnerships with the towns of Awendaw and McClellanville and smaller communities.

- **Special Areas:** Tibwin Proposed National Register District showcases one of the oldest coastal plantations in the St. James Santee Parish surrounded by open fields and extensive trail system.
Coastal Resource Integration Zone (RIZ)

Recreation Site
- Boating Site
- Interpretive Site (Major)
- Interpretive Site (Minor)
- Trailhead
- Wildlife Viewing Site

Other Land
- Other Federal
- State
- County

Transportation
- Interstate Hwy
- State Hwy
- US Hwy
Environmental Regulations

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations provide for categorical exclusions (CEs) to implement the NEPA for the purpose of reducing delay and paperwork. CEQ regulations allow Federal agencies to exclude from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement categories of actions that do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment. Refer to Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Chapters 10 and 30 for additional information.

It appears that this project is categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) per Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15:

- Chapter 32.2 (6), “Timber stand and/or wildlife improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.” [36 CFR 220.6(e)(6)]

Responsible Official and Opportunity for Comment

The Responsible Official for this project is the District Ranger for the Francis Marion Ranger District, Francis Marion National Forest.

Please mail your comments to: District Ranger, Francis Marion Ranger District, 2967 Steed Creek Road, Huger, South Carolina 29450 by July 28, 2017. Electronic comments may also be mailed to: comments-southern-francismarion-sumter-francismarion@fs.fed.us. This project is also listed in the Planning, Administrative Review, and Litigation System (PALS) database and is available for public review at the following web address:

https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=52080

Letters in response to this request should specifically identify the following:

- Name, address and (if possible) telephone number of person(s) providing comments
- Identify project on which comments are being submitted: “Tibwin Tract Prescribed Burn Project”
- Specific issues about the projects

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who commented, will become part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the Agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.
Please contact Mark Ploski at 843-336-2207 for more information.

Sincerely,

/s/ Rhea S. Whalen  
Rhea S. Whalen  
District Ranger

Enclosures