DECISION MEMO

Maintenance and Hazard Tree Removal along Forest Service Road #11 (Glassy Mountain Road) and #26-1 (Wildcat Road) and Around the Glassy Mountain Helibase, Fire Tower and Electronic Site Complex

USDA, Forest Service
Chattooga River Ranger District
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
Rabun County, Georgia

DECISION
I have decided to conduct the following Forest Service road, helibase, fire tower and electronic site complex maintenance and hazard tree removal activities on the Chattooga River Ranger District of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests:

- Maintenance and hazard tree removal along Glassy Mountain Road (FS #11) and Wildcat Road (FS #26-1).

  Maintenance and hazard tree removal on these two roads will be defined as the following: 1) Removal of all trees that are located on the cut bank of the road, or trees that have a physical deformity or defect, lean toward the road, or threaten the road by falling, 2) Removal of all trees that are located on the fill side of the road that are within 8 feet of the road, or have a physical deformity or defect, lean toward the road, or threaten the road by falling, and 3) If there is no cut or fill side of the road then the removal of all trees that are within 8 feet of the road, or have a physical deformity or defect, lean toward the road, or threaten the road by falling.

  The Tray Mountain Wilderness is located along the west side of a section of Wildcat Road. Trees along the road in this section will be assessed for hazard under the same criteria as described above for general forest lands, but NO trees will be removed outside of the 66 feet buffer adjacent to the wilderness boundary (as measured from the centerline of Wildcat Road).

- Hazard tree removal around the perimeter of the Glassy Mountain Helibase, Fire Tower and Electronic Site Complex.

  Hazard tree removal around the perimeter of this complex will be defined as the following: 1) Remove trees that are deemed by the Lead Helicopter Manager and Forest Landscape Architect as impeding the approach and departure of helicopters, and 2) Remove trees that impede the “view” from the fire tower in a 360-degree circle around the tower. This project may also require removal of trees around the perimeter of the Glassy Mountain Electronic Site to eliminate hazard trees from falling and damaging the electronic site as requested by permittees. Removal of trees around this site will include those needed to provide for the safety of the helicopter operations while protecting the visual qualities of the area.

To insure the safety of motor vehicle travelers along these two heavily traveled roads (Glassy Mountain and Wildcat Roads), portions of the roads will be closed while tree removal activities are being conducted. This project will likely impact visitors and private landowners on the roads on an intermittent basis, but only for the sections of road being worked at any given time. The remainder of the road not being worked will remain open to vehicular traffic.
The Glassy Helibase, Fire Tower and Electronic Site Complex will stay operational during the two designated fire seasons (secondary - October 15th thru December 15th and primary - February 1st thru May 15th). Tree removal will be conducted during the unstaffed time of the year to insure access and safety for helibase complex personnel.

**PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION**
The primary reasons for conducting road maintenance and hazard tree removal on these two roads are to provide for vehicle safety and day lighting along Glassy Mountain and Wildcat Roads. Day lighting opens up the tree canopy that shades a roadbed to allow quicker drying of the road surface following rain events and faster thawing of ice and snow. This drying of the road surface aids in reducing rutting or compaction of the travel surface to minimize damage and the potential for off-road sediment movement. Improvement in the road surface will also bring the maintenance level of these two roads to Forest Service road standards (designated for passenger car use), and will facilitate routine road maintenance in the future.

The primary purpose of tree removal around the Glassy Mountain Helibase, Fire Tower and Electronic Site Complex is to insure the safe approach and departure for helicopters that are stationed on the helibase during the primary and secondary fire seasons. During high fire danger the tower is also used to assist with fire detection by Glassy Mountain personnel. The removal of hazard trees will facilitate the ease of viewing and detecting wildfires in a 360-degree circle around the tower. It will also help protect the investment of the permittees in the designated electronic site.

If action is not taken to address these road issues, further deterioration of Glassy Mountain and Wildcat Roads will occur, thus posing a greater safety hazard to forest visitors as well as increasing maintenance cost and damage during periods of inclement weather.

**REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION**
These actions do not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, and therefore, are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement (EIS) or an environment assessment (EA). The category that applies to the Roads portion of this decision is identified in the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 36, Part 220, Section 6(d)(4) (36 CFR 220.6(d)(4)) as “Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landline boundaries.”

The category that applies to the Helibase, Fire Tower and Electronic Site Complex portion of this decision is identified in 36 CFR 220.6(d)(3) as “Repair and maintenance of administrative sites.”

**SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**
Initial interdisciplinary team (IDT) work began for this project in August of 2009. For this project the IDT was limited to key Forest Service interdisciplinary specialists (project files). On Sept 23, 2009 public scoping was initiated by mailing out letters to all individuals, organizations, or agencies who have indicated an interest in projects on the Chattooga River Ranger District. The scoping included a description of the proposed action and a detailed map showing the areas considered for the maintenance and hazard tree removal project.

The IDT identified the following issues or concerns from internal review and public scoping: (1) protection of visuals, water quality and soil productivity, (2) protection of known proposed, threatened, endangered, or sensitive plant and animal species or communities, (3) protection of cultural resources, (4) provide for Forest Service personnel and public safety, (5) protection of public and private property, (6)
help provide improved fire detection during the primary and secondary fire seasons, (7) maintain public access, and (8) maintain the integrity of the Tray Mountain Wilderness Area. These issues have been adequately addressed by a combination of site surveys and mitigation measures identified by Forest Service personnel and by contract administration and monitoring that will take place during project implementation.

FINDINGS OF NO EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES
The IDT screened these actions for the presence of any of the extraordinary circumstances identified in 36 CFR 220.6(b). The IDT found that none of the following extraordinary circumstances exist that might cause the action to have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment: steep slopes or highly erosive soils, Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, Forest Service sensitive species, floodplains, wetlands or municipal watersheds, Congressionally designated areas such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas, inventoried roadless areas, research natural areas, American Indian religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas. These actions are therefore categorically excluded from documentation in an EIS or EA.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS
Forest Plan Consistency – I have found that these actions are consistent with the management direction and management requirements of the Forest Plan (LMP, 2004) for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, including the following goals and objectives:

- Provide a transportation system that supplies the public, the Forest Service, and other authorized users with safe, environmentally sustainable, equitable, financially sound, and operationally effective access to roaded portions of the National Forest (Goal 47, p. 2-44).

- Periodically maintain roads under Forest Service jurisdiction to the appropriate maintenance level standards (Objective 48.2, p. 2-44).

- Keep firefighter and public safety the highest priority in all fire management operations (Goal 57, p. 2-53).

These actions are consistent with the objectives and standards in the following Management Prescription Areas:

- The project actions along Glassy Mountain Road will take place in National Forest System (NFS) lands designated as MRx 8.A.1 (Mix of Successional Forest Habitats), (LMP, p. 3-130).

- The project actions around the Glassy Mountain Helibase, Fire Tower and Electronic Site Complex will take place in NFS lands designated as MRx 5.A (Administrative Sites)(LMP, p. 3-99) and MRx 5.B (Communications Sites)(LMP, p. 3-102).

- The project actions along Wildcat Road will primarily take place in NFS lands designated as MRx 8.A.1 and MRx 11 (Riparian Corridors), (LMP, p. 3-171), but actions along the westernmost section of the road will involve MRx 4.H (Forest-Designated Outstandingly Remarkable Streams)(LMP, p. 3-91) and MRx 8.A.2 (Forest Interior, Mid- To Late-Successional Forest Habitats)(LMP, p. 3-134).
- Maintenance and hazard tree removal is allowed in MRx 4.H by timber sales as necessary to protect multiple-use values and by harvesting activities needed to meet other (non-timber) LMP goals and objectives (LMP, Standard 4.H-015, p. 3-94, and Standard 11-020, p. 3-180).

- Hazard tree removal is allowed in MRx 11 by timber sales as necessary to protect multiple-use values and by harvesting activities needed to meet other (non-timber) LMP goals and objectives (LMP, Standard 11-020, p. 3-180 and Standard 11-028, p. 3-181). Tree removal may also take place in MRx 11 to provide for visitor safety (LMP, Standard 11-024, p. 3-180).

- Any part of Wildcat Road that falls within Management Prescription Area (MRx) 11 - Riparian Corridors, will comply with Standards 11-004, 11-022 and 11-024 of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest’s Land and Resource Management Plan (LMP, page 3-178, 3-180) and meet the required Best Management Practices (BMPs) of Georgia’s Best Management Practices for Forestry. A priority objective in identifying trees to retain or remove will be to provide quality habitat for aquatic species in Wildcat Creek while addressing visitor safety and effective road management.

Cultural Resources – The actions will not adversely affect any sites listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historical resources (project file).

Biological Resources – Implementing this decision will not adversely affect proposed, threatened, endangered, or sensitive species (PETS), locally rare species, or their habitat, will not result in the loss of any other species’ viability, and will not create significant trends towards Federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act (project file).

Best Management Practices – The activities will comply with State of Georgia approved Best Management Practices (BMP’s). The approved road maintenance and associated hazard tree removal activities around the helibase, fire tower and electronic sites are not major ground disturbing activities that would require a land disturbing permit or trout stream buffer variance from the State of Georgia.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW, APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES, AND IMPLEMENTATION
This decision is not subject to appeal per 36 CFR 215.12(f), therefore this decision may be implemented immediately.

CONTACT
For further information about this decision or the approved activities, contact Wayne Herron, District Fire Management Officer, by phone at 706-754-6221, ext. 102, or by email at cwherron@fs.fed.us.

/s/ David W. Jensen

DAVID W. JENSEN
District Ranger
Chattooga River Ranger District

12/3/09

Date