Decision Memo

Pocket Wind Damage Salvage and Reforestation Project

USDA Forest Service
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
Conasauga Ranger District
Floyd County, Georgia

Decision

I have decided to carry out the salvage harvest on 5 acres and associated reforestation activities on ten acres in Compartment 927 of the Pocket that were severely damaged by windstorms during late October of this year. This project will enhance forest health and restore native forest communities.

Background

A series of severe storms crossed through portions of the Armuchee Unit of the Conasauga Ranger District during the last week of October 2010, including parts of the Pocket (compartment 927) in Floyd, Walker and Gordon counties. Trees were uprooted, broken off, and/or partially windthrown due to the heavy winds associated with these storm events. The District estimates that approximately 15 acres were impacted in the Pocket area.

In August of 2010, the Pocket Timber Sale was advertised and awarded to a timber sale purchaser. The Pocket Timber Sale includes approximately 410 acres of commercial thinning in loblolly and shortleaf pine stands marked to retain approximately 60-70 ft$^2$ per acre as leave trees following thinning. No harvest activities have been conducted in the sale area since award of the contract. The wind storms that occurred in late October affected approximately 15 acres of merchantable timber within the sale area boundary of the recently awarded Pocket Timber Sale. These affected areas include: (1) approximately 10 acres within awarded harvest units which contain a loblolly pine forest type and (2) approximately 5 acres of a mixed hardwood-shortleaf pine forest type outside of, but immediately adjacent to, a harvest unit. All affected acres contain a mixture of wind thrown, broken, leaning, and partially damaged trees; undamaged overstory trees (oak and pine) are sparsely scattered throughout the 15 acres.

This area of the Pocket (compartment 927) has a history of southern pine beetle (SPB) activity which has reduced tree density on some acres to sparse conditions. Additionally, a small SPB salvage sale was conducted in the vicinity of these damaged areas within the last year. The recent wind storm damage described here has extended some small gaps created from past SPB salvage harvests into stand-sized openings which now contain an under-stocked overstory. The understory in these sparse areas consists of mixed oak and shortleaf pine reproduction, as well as other less desirable hardwoods (red maple, sourwood, yellow poplar, and sassafras).

Description of Project

Approximately 5 acres in stand 15, compartment 927 in the Pocket would be commercially harvested to salvage damaged and dying trees resulting from the wind storms that impacted the area in late October 2010. A residual overstory of 10-30 ft$^2$ per acre would be retained where available. Logging facilities and traffic patterns required for the harvest would be incorporated into those associated with the
commercial thinning operations to occur across the Pocket Timber Sale area. Additionally, Design Features and Mitigation Measures developed for the Armuchee Ridges Project and currently included in the Pocket Timber Sale Contract would be adopted for the proposed 5 acres of salvage harvest.

Following the commercial harvest operations, reforestation activities would be applied to the 5 acres described above, as well as on an additional 5 acres immediately adjacent to the salvage unit that were affected by southern pine beetle during the last year. A total of 10 acres would be site prepared by manual methods and by prescribed fire, and then hand planted with shortleaf pine seedlings on a wide spacing. These activities would occur 1-2 years following the commercial harvest.

**Purpose and Need**

The purpose and need for this project is to salvage dead and/or severely damaged trees within the sale area boundary of the awarded Pocket Timber Sale associated with the wind storm events of late October 2010. Salvage harvest of these damaged areas will “enhance forest health conditions substantially damaged by…..wind throw, or other catastrophes,” (Chattahoochee-Oconee Land and Resource Management Plan, p. 2-40). Salvage harvest will also allow the affected acres to be regenerated to desired native forest types (e.g. oak-shortleaf pine).

**Category**

I have determined that this project can be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement because it falls under the intent of **Category 13** (FSH 1909.15, 32.1) which allows for “Salvage of dead and/or dying trees not to exceed 250 acres, requiring no more than ½ mile of temporary road construction. The proposed action may include incidental removal of live or dead trees for landings, skid trails, and road clearing (36 CFR 220.6(e)(13)),” and **Category 5** (FSH 1909.15, 32.1 “Regeneration of an area to native tree species, including site preparation that does not involve the use of herbicides or result in vegetation type conversion (36 CFR 220.6(e)(5))”

**Forest Plan Direction**

This project is consistent with the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan):

- Goal 41- Enhance forest health conditions in forest stands that are: (1) substantially damaged by fire, wind throw, or other catastrophes; or (2) in imminent danger from insect or disease attack (Forest Plan, p. 2-40); and
- Objective 3.6 – Within the first 10 years of Plan implementation restore oak or oak-pine forests on 1,250 acres of the Chattahoochee NF……(Forest Plan, p. 2-6).

**Public Involvement**

Scoping for this project consisted of discussions with District and Forest Staff specialists and requesting input by mailing a scoping letter dated November 1, 2010. The District received two responses during the scoping period. Both were supportive of the project; however, one of the respondents (Georgia Forest Watch) expressed some concern over the population of pink lady slipper orchids that occur within the sale area boundary of the Pocket Timber Sale. The projects included in this decision are not located within the population of pink lady slippers referenced by Georgia Forest Watch. However, the District will administer harvest activities which occur within the referenced population of pink lady slipper orchids so that the plants are not significantly impacted by other planned logging operations associated with the Pocket Timber Sale. Concern over the use of prescribed fire and its impacts on the population of lady
slipper orchids was also expressed. The proposed site preparation by prescribed fire is site specific to the 10 acres to be reforested in this project. As described above, the proposed actions associated with this project, including prescribed fire for site preparation do not occur within referenced population of pink lady slipper orchids. Landscape level prescribed fire for wildlife habitat improvement is planned for most of the acres within the Pocket. These prescribed burns will be conducted during the dormant season and will not significantly impact the population of lady slipper orchids.

REVIEW OF EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES

I have considered the resources found in the project area and have determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the project to have significant effects. The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist. I have considered:

1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.

The Biological Evaluation indicates that this project will have no effect on federally listed species or their designated critical habitat(s). The project will have no impacts to Regional Forester's listed Sensitive species or their habitats. The proposed action will not result in a trend toward federal listing of Sensitive species under the Endangered Species Act, or a loss of viability.

2. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds

These projects will not result in the occupancy or modification of a floodplain. This decision will not affect floodplains or wetlands. There are no source water/municipal watersheds in this project area.

3. Congressionally Designated Areas

There is no designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, National Recreation Areas, or Wild and Scenic Rivers within the decision area. There are no inventoried Roadless Areas (RARE II or Forest Plan) in the decision area (Forest Plan FEIS and ROD 2004). This decision will not affect inventoried Roadless Areas. There are no Research Natural Areas in the decision area. This decision will not affect Research Natural Areas.

4. Native American Religious or Cultural Sites, Archaeological sites, or Historic Properties or Areas

Surveys were conducted for native American Religious or Cultural Sites, for Archaeological sites, and for Historic Properties or Areas that may be affected by the decision. No significant impacts were identified.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

This decision complies with all applicable laws and regulations. For example, I have considered the following:
1. **Clean Water Act**

This Act is to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act through the use of Best Management Practices and Forest Plan standards. This decision incorporates Best Management Practices and Forest Plan standards to ensure protection of soil and water resources. Specific mitigation measures established for the Armuchee Ridges Project relating to soil and water resource protection will be adopted during this project.

2. **Clean Air Act**

Under this Act areas of the country were designated as Class I, II, or III airsheds for Prevention of Significant Deterioration purposes. Class I areas generally include national parks and wilderness areas. The area covered by this decision is a Class II airshed. This project will not affect the airshed.

3. **Federal Cave Resources Protection Act**

This Act is to secure, protect, preserve, and maintain significant caves, to the extent practical. There are no known cave resources in the project area.

4. **Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)**

This Order requires consideration of whether projects will disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with this Act. Public involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision. This decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

5. **National Forest Management Act**

This project complies with the seven requirements of the National Forest Management Act related to vegetation management (36 CFR 219.27(b)).

   1. It is best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area based on Forest-wide direction. This suitability is based on the potential environmental, biological, cultural resource, aesthetic, engineering, and economic impacts.

   2. The areas will remain adequately stocked after treatment.

   3. This action has not been chosen primarily due to cost considerations, although this was taken into consideration.

   4. This action has been chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.

   5. The action will avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.

   6. The action will provide the desired effects on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, woody regeneration, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and resource needs.

   7. The project area has adequate roads and no new permanent roads are necessary to implement this decision. This proposal is practical in terms of transportation requirements, and the
total costs of preparation and administration. This project does not require a project-level roads analysis because there are no permanent changes in access into the area and road standards will not change.

APPEAL RIGHTS

This decision is not subject to appeal, pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12 (f).

IMPLEMENTATION

This project can be implemented immediately. The harvest activities will be conducted during Fiscal Year 2011; reforestation activities are planned one to two years following harvest.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For further information about this project, contact Danny Skojac, Conasauga Ranger District, 3941 Hwy 76, Chatsworth, GA. 30705, or by telephone at (706) 695-6736 ext. 104, between the hours of 8:00a.m. & 4:30p.m. Monday through Friday.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL SIGNATURE AND DATE

/s/ Michele H. Jones  12/10/2010
MICHELE H. JONES  DATE
District Ranger