



File Code: 2670
Date: June 10, 2016

Dr. Catherine Phillips
US Fish and Wildlife Service
1601 Balboa Ave.
Panama City, FL 32405

Dear Dr. Phillips,

The US Forest Service, Southern Region, requested initiation of formal consultation for the Beasley Pond Project on April 29, 2015. That project proposes approximately 3,800 ac. of timber thinning and associated activities in a 6,800 ac. area in the western side of the Apalachicola National Forest. In the project's Biological Assessment (BA), we determined that the proposed action may affect, and is likely to adversely affect, up to 12 red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) clusters due to timber harvest activities (cutting, skidding, hauling) during the breeding season (April – July); 4 of these clusters would also experience disturbance from log landings located within 200ft of active trees during the breeding season. The purpose of this letter is to notify you that we intend to change project implementation in a way that requires modification of the effects determination for RCW that was made in the original BA. This change resulted from internal discussion as well as recent conversations between your staff and National Forests in Florida biologists.

The 12 clusters that the original BA determined could be adversely affected are located in areas that often have high soil moisture that precludes heavy equipment use except during the driest times of year, which can be somewhat unpredictable but often occur in the late spring (April – May) and fall. In the past we have avoided timber harvest near RCW clusters during the breeding season, as recommended by the RCW Recovery Plan and our Forest Plan. However, this approach has resulted in substantial delays in several recent timber sales in habitat similar to that in the Beasley project, which in turn prolongs habitat restoration and delays the return of prescribed fire into those stands because fire burns off marking paint and could damage trees that have been sold to contractors. There are also stands in the project area within 1500' of documented flatwoods salamander ponds that would have both RCW and flatwoods salamander breeding season restrictions (October to May, or when the ponds dry). The rationale for allowing timber harvest during the RCW breeding season is that by facilitating harvest of marked trees whenever soil moisture conditions allow, we can reintroduce prescribed fire to the area as soon as possible and avoid harvesting during the flatwood salamander breeding season for those sites within the 1500' feet zone.

Timber sale areas usually include multiple stands that may vary in soil conditions, and inability to harvest the wetter sites can delay prescribed burning in the entire sale area. Therefore, I have decided that we will not prohibit timber harvest in the RCW breeding season throughout the



entire Beasley project. We conducted a spatial analysis based on data in Appendix B of the BA and found that a total of 21 clusters include active trees located either within stands proposed for timber harvest or within 200ft of a harvest stand or hauling route. Because these clusters may be disturbed by the noise and activity from logging equipment during breeding season, with this letter I am authorizing modification of our BA to state that up to 21 RCW clusters may be affected, and are likely to be adversely affected, by implementation of the Beasley Pond project:

Original analysis			Supplemental analysis
Road Construction, Hauling and Harvest (8 clusters)	Road Construction, Hauling, Harvest, and Log Landings Within 200' (2 clusters)	Harvest and Log Landings and Log Landings Within 200' (2 clusters)	Harvest Within Cluster Only (9 clusters)
26.01	27.02	28.09	26.06
26.02	27.04	28.06	27.06
26.04			27.03
26.05			28.01
27.01			28.03
27.05			29.01
27.07			28.05
28.02			69.03
			73.13

Our original determination that the project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, is unchanged for the remaining 11 clusters (26.07, 28.03, 28.8, 28.10, 29.05, 69.05, 72.01, 72.1, 73.01, 73.03, 73.13) that do not have active trees within stands proposed for harvest or within 200ft of a harvest stand or hauling route. This change in timing of project implementation does not affect any other species considered in the BA.

Whenever soil moisture conditions allow, harvest during the non-breeding season will be encouraged to avoid these potential adverse effects, so it is likely that fewer than 21 clusters would experience disturbance from harvest. As requested, we will monitor all RCW clusters in the project area that may be adversely affected in this way and provide reports to USFWS on cluster status and reproductive success.

For additional information, please contact John Dunlap at jpgunlap@fs.fed.us or 850-643-2282.

Sincerely,


/s/ Allen Smith

ALLEN SMITH
Deputy District Ranger

cc: Beth LeMaster, Duke Rankin