



File Code: 1950/2670

Date: April 2, 2014

Dear Interested Forest User:

The Regional Forester is proposing to close all caves and abandoned mines on National Forest System lands across the Southern Region for a timeframe of five years from the date of the decision, to slow the spread of white-nose syndrome and conserve cave roosting bats. We are inviting you to submit comments on the proposed activities disclosed in this letter.

PROPOSED ACTION

The project area is located within all National Forests that are administered by the Southern Region, excluding El Yunque National Forest in Puerto Rico. All caves and abandoned mines will be closed to public entry. The only exceptions will be Blanchard Springs Caverns where the Forest Service has complete access control through the visitor's center and decontamination protocols are in place, for individual with written authorization to be in caves to aid the Forest Service with cave management actions or for search and rescue operations. Consistent with the Federal Cave Resources Protection Act and Title 5, Section 552 of the United States Code, the specific location of the cave and mines is not being disclosed for the protection of the caves, mines and associated wildlife species.

The purpose of the proposed action is close caves and abandoned mines to minimize the transmission potential of white-nose syndrome and for the protection of associated wildlife species. White-nose syndrome affects hibernating bats by depleting nutrients and causes some bats to exit caves during hibernation in order to try and feed. Bats with white-nose syndrome exhibit uncharacteristic behavior during cold winter months, which includes flying outside in the day and clustering near hibernacula entrances. Thus, they are not successful due to winter conditions and lack of food at that time of year and ultimately those bats die.

Under normal hibernation times, bats are already stressed. Thus, it is essential they find food and shelter immediately upon leaving the cave in spring. It is important that quality foraging and roosting habitat is adequately available post hibernation.

There have been new scientific developments in bio-control of *Pseudogymnoascus destructans* that appear promising. The five year closure period will allow the full development of these bio-control techniques, allow for laboratory testing, and field trials, and minimize the human spread of *Pseudogymnoascus destructans*. Abstracts of the presentations on these new bio-controls can be viewed at: http://www.whitenosesyndrome.org/sites/default/files/files/2013_wns_workshop_abstracts-final.pdf.



HOW TO COMMENT

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on these proposed actions and will be available for public inspection. 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. Specific written comments must be submitted to:

Liz Agpaoa, Regional Forester
USDA Forest Service
c/o Dennis Krusac
1720 Peachtree Road, NW, Suite 816 N
Atlanta, GA 30309
404-347-4338 (office)
404-347-4154 (fax)

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx) to comments-southern-regional-office@fs.fed.us.

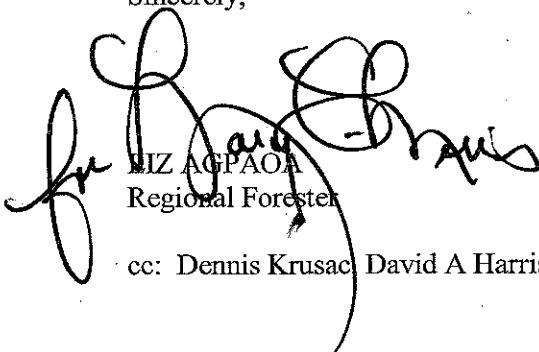
This decision is not subject to administrative appeal pursuant to Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (January 17, 2014).

Please state "2014 Southern Region Caves and Mine Closure" in the subject line when providing electronic comments, or on the envelope when replying by mail. Additional information is also available on the webpage: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/main/r8/landmanagement>.

For additional information concerning this project, contact:

Dennis Krusac
Endangered Species Specialist
USDA Forest Service
1720 Peachtree Road, NW, Suite 816 N
Atlanta, GA 30309
404-347-4338 (office)

Sincerely,



LIZ AGPAOA
Regional Forester

cc: Dennis Krusac, David A Harris, Stephanie Medlin