



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Land Between The Lakes
National Recreation Area

100 Van Morgan Drive
Golden Pond, KY 42211

File Code: 1950
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Dear Friend of Land Between The Lakes:

The US Forest Service Land Between The Lakes National Recreation Area (NRA) is seeking your involvement in the process of preparing five Decision Memos for five prescribed fire projects. I am requesting your input early in the process by asking for comments under scoping and 30-day notice and comment concurrently. Scoping is required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) 40 CFR 1500-1508. Early input during project development is referred to as "scoping" under NEPA. The appeals regulation requires a 30-day notice and comment period. Information on where to direct your comments is listed at the end of each of the enclosed attachments for each project description.

Background

The US Forest Service is proposing categorical exclusions from further documentation in an environmental analysis for five prescribed burns totaling 4,982 acres, in five separate projects. In the past, scoping and comment announcements for prescribed fire were handled individually, sometimes causing confusion. Combining comment periods for these prescribed fire projects in one package is an effort on our part to reduce confusion, save time and resources, and to present a total picture of our general forest prescribed fire proposals for the 2009 late winter and early spring burn season. Your thoughts and comments during this scoping period and concurrent notice and comment period will be considered on a project by project basis.

These burns are proposed to maintain early successional wildlife habitat in open lands, reduce the number of and competition from non-native invasive species, and to develop oak-grassland habitat which is important for many wildlife species.

Maintenance of early successional areas for wildlife using prescribed burning is called for in the 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), and in the Open Lands Revised Environmental Assessment of 2007 (OLEA; www.lbl.org/LRMPPProjects.html). A mix of early successional areas, regenerating forests, and mature forests contributes to habitat diversity and allows for a larger diversity of wildlife (LRMP-Part 1.A., pages 27-28). The OLEA discusses a number of active management techniques for open lands. Among these, prescribed burning would be used for the removal of fuels buildup in open lands, stimulation of vegetation growth following spring burns, release of phosphorus and potassium back to the soil, and reduction of competition from less desirable species (OLEA 3.1.3). Development of oak-grassland habitat is similarly discussed in the LRMP and in the Prior Creek EA (www.lbl.org/LRMPPProjects.html).

These prescribed burns are proposed to occur during the 2009 spring season (February-April). In some cases these are repeat burns of established native warm-season grass fields, intended to maintain the desired conditions by periodic burning.



These actions meet the purpose and intent of the Healthy Forest Initiative (HFI) of 2002 and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) of 2003 (<http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/>). The HFI's intent is to minimize the risk that severe and catastrophic wildfires pose to people, communities, and the environment. The intent of the HFRA is also to minimize the risk of severe and destructive wildfires, to improve the health of forests, and to restore fire-resilient stands of forests.

Vision and Area Wide Goals

The basis for these project proposals is discussed in the LRMP, which has a broad *Vision*. The vision is refined further by the area wide *Goals* and *Objectives*. The *Vision* for the NRA includes managing for diverse and unique environments to meet wildlife habitat needs and enhance visual aesthetics of the landscape. It also calls for open lands maintenance in order to provide early successional habitat that will increase wildlife and plant diversity, as well as providing for increased wildlife viewing. The Three Ponds and Crooked Creek projects contained in this package are in keeping with the vision of the LRMP that states: “*Creation and development of two Oak-Grassland Demonstration Areas will establish open woodland conditions with rich and diverse understories of grasses and wildflowers, sustained by prescribed fire*” (LRMP pg. 24).

Area-wide *goals* of the LRMP are statements that focus on the desired condition of the NRA. Two goals relate to these projects:

Goal 5, ... “*Use a collaborative approach to maintain and restore: 1) a diversity of plant and animal communities that support viability of associated plants, fish, and wildlife; and, 2) sustainable levels of habitat and wildlife populations to support public demand for wildlife-related recreation;*”

Goal 7, ... “*Enhance dispersed recreational and environmental education opportunities throughout the LBL.*”

Objectives form the time-specific, measurable, planned actions that will help meet the goals. Goals and objectives relating to the specific Categorical Exclusions are listed in the project area descriptions below. For more information about the goals and objectives for managing the NRA, please visit www.LBL.org and look for “Resource Planning.”

Projects

There are five projects that I am proposing in Trigg County, Kentucky, and Stewart County, Tennessee. Their general locations are in the Buffalo Trail, Crooked Creek, School House, Three Ponds, and Neville Creek areas of the NRA. Specific information and requests for comments about each project are listed as separate items.

Category of Actions

A Federal Court decision in Earth Island Institute v. Ruthenbeck invalidated the provisions of 36 CFR Part 215 that excluded categorical exclusions from notice, comment, and appeal. The District Court further clarified, on September 16, 2005, that its order is to be applied prospectively after July 7, 2005 nationwide. The District Court issued another clarification on October 19, 2005 listing the categories subject to notice, comment, and appeal. The Chief of the Forest Service followed with instructions for compliance in a letter dated October 20, 2005.



Since these actions were affected by the court order, formal notice and comment period was established, as described below.

The five proposed actions are categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment as described in the Earth Island Institute v. Ruthenbeck Ruling of October 19, 2005. The category of these actions is Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Chapter 30, 31.2 Category Number 6, “Timber Stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.”

Potential Concerns

Input from the public and US Forest Service staff that I have received on other prescribed fire projects raises some potential issues to disclose and consider at this point in the process. These concerns are common to all five projects on which I am requesting your comments and response.

Air quality is a consideration during prescribed fires. Smoke may contain a number of pollutants that can negatively impact human health, including carbon monoxide (CO), volatile organic compounds (VOCs), particulate matter, and nitrogen oxides (NO_x). Planned or managed fires are subject to state air quality regulations. They are designed to minimize emissions and the adverse impacts of smoke on public health and the environment. Many techniques are used to manage the impacts from smoke, including scheduling burning during appropriate weather conditions and controlling the amount of fuel and acreage burned.

There is a concern that global climate change may be exacerbated by forest fires, especially if allowed to burn frequently and out of control over large areas. Climate change may occur in part because the burned forest areas are no longer sequestering carbon dioxide, and carbon stocks that had been stored within the biomass of the forest are released into the atmosphere. However, unlike large wildfires, prescribed burns are low-intensity and cover only small areas at a time. They do not result in large-scale mature tree death, as wildfires sometimes do. On the contrary, research indicates that prescribed burning results in a reduction of risk of catastrophic wildfire occurrence. At a global or national scale, the short-term reduction in carbon stocks and sequestration rates of the proposed burn projects are imperceptibly small, as are the potential long-term benefits. Researchers have found that management actions such as those proposed may help sustain the current strength of the carbon sequestration ability of U.S. forests, by improving the resilience of forests to climate-induced increases in disturbances such as catastrophic wildfire.

In some circumstances, prescribed burning has been shown to increase the occurrence of non-native invasive species, particularly *Sericea lespedeza* (*Lespedeza cuneata*) and Kentucky 31 tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*). However, studies demonstrating positive impacts of fire on non-native species were short-term; research on long-term (>20 years) effects of fire show that overall, native communities benefit from fire to the detriment or exclusion of non-native species.

Potential damage to cemeteries on the NRA is a concern when burning, and steps will be taken to protect cemeteries. Additionally, contact persons involved with each cemetery within or adjacent to the prescribed burn areas will be notified of the proposed project and the NRA will make



efforts to work with these persons as needed.

Public Involvement

These proposed actions are only proposals at this stage and are not decided actions. As shown in the above potential concerns section, the Forest Service has heard some concerns relevant to this project. In order to census issues which I have not considered, and of which I may not be aware, I invite your comments and suggestions. To be most helpful, please provide clear and concise explanations of your concerns, and any supporting information. Sharing specific concerns with us early in the process will lead to a more collaborative approach in resolving those concerns. I am beginning the public scoping, and notice and comment process to determine issues to be addressed resulting from these proposed actions. Please refer to the individual projects at the end of this letter for information on how to be involved with each particular project.

Tribal Consultation

Tribal consultation to address potential impacts or concerns related to traditional use or sacred sites as a result of project implementation and to meet the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 as amended, the American Indian Freedom of Religion Act, the Archaeological Resources Protection Act, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act is coordinated with the NEPA process in order to address concerns early in project development. If your tribe has information, comments, or concerns related to historic properties with traditional or religious significance pertaining to this project, please email them to comments-southern-land-between-lakes@fs.fed.us with the project name and Tribal Comment in the subject heading. You may also learn more about the project by visiting: <http://www.lbl.org/LRMPPProjects.html>.

Section 106 Public Participation

Section 106 public participation for NHPA is being initiated through the SOPA list and notice on our website: <http://www.lbl.org/LRMPPProjects.html>. Any other questions, concerns, or comments related to heritage compliance for any of the projects in this letter should be emailed to comments-southern-land-between-lakes@fs.fed.us with the specific project name and Heritage Comment in the subject heading.

Thank you for your interest in resource management at the NRA. If you have questions on technical aspects of one or more of the proposed projects, call the person named in each proposal for comment. Please submit your comments as directed within each project proposal.

Sincerely,

/s/ William P. Lisowsky

WILLIAM P. LISOWSKY

Area Supervisor

Enclosures

