



File Code: 1950/2400

Date: July 29, 2016

Dear Interested Party:

This project announcement letter serves to initiate scoping, “an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed” (40 CFR 1501.7). I request your input on the following proposed actions regarding the Gap Creek Project.

The Caddo-Womble Ranger District proposes to implement the following management activities*:

- Regeneration harvest – 40 acres
 - Site prep prescribed burn – 152 acres
 - Site preparation (Chemical/Mechanical) – 40 acres
 - Release (Chemical/Manual) – 40 acres
 - Pre-Commercial thinning – 40 acres
 - Chop/Rip/Hand Plant shortleaf pine seedlings – 40 acres
 - Intermediate harvest – 2,894 acres
 - Woodland Development – 1,442 acres
 - Pond maintenance – 20 each
 - Wildlife opening maintenance – 11 acres
 - Nest boxes – 32 each
 - Landscape burn – 13,272 acres
 - Fire line construction – 18 miles
 - Fire line maintenance – 14 miles
 - Road construction – 3.5 miles
 - Road reconstruction – 31 miles
 - Temporary road construction – 22 miles
 - Pre-haul road maintenance – 2 miles
 - Watershed improvement throughout project area
 - Abandoned mine closures throughout project area
 - Non-native invasive plant species treatment throughout project area
 - Nuisance plant treatment along the Lake Ouachita Vista Trail (LOViT)
- *All figures are approximate and are for total acres in a stand. Treatment acres would be less due to avoided slopes and/or riparian areas.

The Gap Creek Project area is located in T1S, R23W, S31-36; T2S, R22W, S18; T2S, R23W, S1-24 and 26-35; T2S, R24W, S1, 2, 12 and 24; and T3S, R23W, S4-6, Garland and Montgomery Counties, Arkansas. This 20,300+/- acre area is comprised of Compartments 1612, 1618, 1620-1625, 1629, 1630 and 1632. The proposed management activities would occur in Management Areas (MA) 3, 6, 9, 14 and 16.



Purpose of the Action

The purpose of this action is to restore the health and vigor of the Gap Creek Project area by providing for a diversity of plant and animal communities, early seral habitat in a well-distributed grass/forb or shrub/seedling stage, reduction in fuel accumulation, and production of a sustainable yield of wood products.

Need for the Action

- The role of recurring fire is needed to reduce understories necessary for the growth of wildlife foods, the natural regeneration of pine and oak, and provide habitat conditions for plants adapted to fire.
- Pine and hardwood stands contain damaged, poorly formed and diseased trees. The trees are overcrowded or densely stocked, reducing growth and crown development. These conditions result in stress and reduced vigor and health, thus increasing susceptibility to insects and disease.
- There is limited access to those stands in need of silvicultural treatment, resulting in the need for new road construction. Some existing roads are not useable and create the need for road re-construction.
- There is a lack of high quality forage and a lack of nesting habitat for species requiring early successional habitat.
- A portion of the project area is located near a known hibernacula of the Northern long-eared bat resulting in the need for special management practices to protect species habitat.
- There are known populations of exotic and invasive plant species throughout the project area
- The project area has a high volume of recreational visitors resulting in the need for recreational area and trail maintenance
- Along the LOViT there is a high density of nuisance species resulting in the need for treatment
- The area has a high density of abandoned mines resulting in the need for mine closure for public health and safety, as well as wildlife habitat protection.

Invitation to Participate in Project Planning

Scoping is not limited to a single point in time; we will continue to accept and consider comments until an implementation decision is made. With that said, your comments will be most helpful if they are received early in the process. They will help us identify environmental issues associated with implementation, and alternative ways to meet Forest plan objectives and desired conditions. Your involvement will enable us to better assess concerns of the public.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will become a part of the public record for this proposed action. 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.

Objection Process

This project is subject to subparts A and B of 36 *CFR Part 218 Project-Level Predecisional Administrative Review Process* (objection process); it is not authorized under the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA).

The designated opportunity for public comment in response to this solicitation is **July 29th to August 29th**. Providing specific written comments during this time will afford you standing to later file an objection to the project, should you desire (see Upcoming Project Planning Steps).

Pursuant to §218.2, specific written comments should be within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider.

How to Comment

Specific written comments must be submitted to: Shalonda Guy, District Ranger, 1523 Hwy 270 E, Mt. Ida AR 71957 or fax to (870) 867-3338. The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a common digital format to comments-southern-ouachita-womble@fs.fed.us.

Upcoming Project Planning Steps

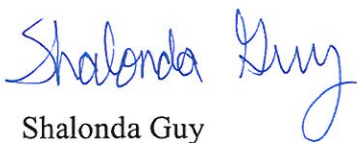
As stated above, your comments will help us identify issues and they will be used to formulate alternatives to this proposal. An environmental analysis will be conducted and the results will be documented in an environmental assessment (EA).

Upon completion, the draft EA will be released for public review and comment. A 30-day notice and comment period pursuant to 36 CFR 218 will be initiated. This comment period will afford you another opportunity to obtain standing to later file an objection to the project, should you desire.

An objection period, if required, will follow the regulation found in §218.7. Issues raised in objections must be based on previously submitted specific written comments regarding the project and attributed to the objector, unless the issue is based on new information that arose after a designated opportunity to comment (§218.8(c)).

If you have questions about this project or would like more information, please contact Seanna Whisenhunt at (870) 867-2101 or swhisenhunt@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,



Shalonda Guy
District Ranger

Enclosure