

Bankhead Liaison Panel

Meeting Summary

March 14, 2023

The Bankhead Liaison Panel met on March 14, 2023 at the First National Bank in Double Springs, Alabama. The following Forest Service staff attended the meeting: Andy Scott, Bankhead District Ranger, Rita Patterson Bankhead Administrative Support Specialist, Jason Harris, Bankhead Silviculturist, Kerry Clark, Bankhead Fire Management Officer, Nathan Hatch, Bankhead Prescription Forester and Allison Cochran and Koven Minor, Bankhead Wildlife Biologists. The following members of the liaison panel attended the meeting: Mike Henshaw, Alabama Cooperative Extension and Winston County Natural Resources Council, James Alexander, Backcountry Horsemen of Alabama, Kevin Pugh, Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area Biologist, Charles Borden, landowner and recreationist, Anthony Hood, recreationist and landowner, and Randy Feltman, logger and resident. Janice Barrett represented Wild Alabama in Mark Kolinski's absence. The following people also attended the meeting: Mike Bagwell, Amy Melson, Damon Parker, Wayne and Patsy White, Kim Waites, Maggie Johnston, Barbara (Bob) Crow, Katie Clark, Alissa Hood, Stephen Brown, Linda and Joe Grajewski, David and Lynette Langham, Pam Horton, James Creel, Tommy Jordan, DJ Selam, Joe Jenkins, Jonathan Kelly, Ben Mause, Mike Aaron, Kelvis Jeffreys, Greg Meiman, and Karen Hulbert. A few other individuals attended that did not sign in.

Bankhead District Ranger Andy Scott welcomed the group, made introductions, and provided some background information on the Bankhead Liaison Panel.

Rachel Brubaker, a graduate student at Tennessee State University, presented her Master's Thesis research work under Dr. William Sutton. Rachel's project focuses on the **effects of longleaf pine restoration practices and assemblages of reptiles and amphibians on Bankhead**. Rachel described her work trapping herpetofauna on southern Bankhead and some preliminary findings. She discussed her successful captures and radio tracking of the elusive **Northern Pine Snake**, a species of high conservation concern. Rachel also discussed their work around habitat modeling and ground-truthing for **green salamanders**, a species of high conservation concern. Rachel captures 2,671 individual animals representing 46 species in her two years of field work on the Southern portion of Bankhead National Forest. She is working on data analysis to see if any species or species groups are more closely associated with certain restoration treatments or stages. She is looking at associations with several habitat variables for which the Forest Service has the ability to manage, including tree basal area, litter depth, woody debris, etc.

Allison Cochran, Bankhead District Wildlife Biologist, provided updates on on-going survey and monitoring efforts for three federally listed species, the **Black Warrior waterdog, the flattened musk turtle and the rush darter**. Through cooperative efforts of numerous partners, a few new discoveries have been made. The group has documented a new upstream record of Black Warrior Waterdog on Brushy Creek, about one mile upstream of previous records. The group has also documented rush darter in five locations on the Bankhead National Forest, all tributaries to Clear Creek. The group has

monitored the fish's activity in all months of the year and documented life history information. Prior to 2019, the rush darter was not known from the Bankhead National Forest, only on private lands nearby. These efforts inform forest management and wildlife conservation and will continue into the future.

Kim Waites with Wild Alabama shared an update on a **Sipsey Wilderness Area trails grant**. The Legacy Trails grant will help address sustainability on 20.5 miles of trails in the Sipsey Wilderness Area. The grant will fund a contractor-led trail assessment, training on building trail water drainage structures, time for WA staff and volunteers to cover up confusing social trails and repair a washed-out culvert on a horse trail.

A few issues were raised around social trails. The social trail to Sougahoagdee Falls is severely eroding and needs attention. A user created horse trail north of the Brushy Creek bridge on FSR 254 is eroding and needs attention. A question was raised about the long-term solution for social trails, especially with all the issues around online apps and social media.

Jason Harris, Bankhead Silviculturist, gave an update on the **Balls Mountain Citizen Science White Oak Project**. Through numerous partnerships and citizen science efforts, a stand in the Balls Mountain area south of the Sipsey Wilderness is being planted with white oaks, red oaks, and shortleaf pine. The primary purpose of the project is to study the efficacy of planting oaks as part of hardwood restoration. Volunteers, local students and scientists with the Southern Research Station collaborated to collect 10,000's of white oak acorns. These acorns were grown in a nursery and are being planted on Bankhead now. Scientists will monitor the growth and survival of the plantings within the research plot as well as other seed sources from the Tennessee Tree Improvement Program as part of a very large study.

Andy Scott provided some **general updates on the Bankhead National Forest**. Andy discussed staffing vacancies and reliance and an appreciation of our numerous partnerships.

Timber Sales Update – There is one active timber sale near Natural Bridge in the Moreland community. There is one more timber sale that should be cut this year in the Dry Hollow area in Lawrence county. There are currently four additional timber sales that have been purchased but aren't being actively logged. There are three-four timber sales planned for offering this year.

Andy Scott also provided a Bankhead **prescribed burning** update. We have burned about 7,500 acres in Fiscal Year 2023 to date. Our planned, active and completed burns may be found on the Forest Service Southern Region Prescribed Burning website here (click the link) - [Southern Region Rx Burn Tracker](#).

Recreation updates include the Sipsey bridge between the upper and lower parking lots was badly damaged in a wind storm a few weeks ago. It is closed, as it is unsafe for any travel. The Forest Service engineering staff is reviewing the situation to determine options for the bridge. The Forest Service is still in process of trying to replace the Houston Boat Ramp courtesy pier. The recreation staff have been installing new fee tubes that are more resistant to damage and provide for safer fee collection by employees. The staff are also inspecting our recreation areas for maintenance needs prior to the spring and summer season.

The Bankhead staff are working on many on-going special use permits for various projects.

Wild pig control is on-going within and outside the Sipsey Wilderness Area in partnership with USDA APHIS Wildlife Services and the Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (DCNR). Today

Wildlife Services was on-site with a helicopter as part of our integrated pest management work with wild pig control. DCNR has hired a new employee for the pig project.

Kevin Pugh, Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area Biologist, spoke about **turkey season changes**. There's been a noticeable decline in turkey populations in the southeast. In Alabama, we've restructured turkey season in response. On Black Warrior WMA and the Bankhead NF, this year turkey season is the same. There's a youth hunt on 4/1. Regular season opens on 4/8. The bag limit is four total birds. The maximum on Black Warrior WMA is two birds. The maximum on Bankhead NF outside of the WMA is two birds. For the first ten days of turkey season, decoys are not allowed. For the first ten days, only one bird may be harvested on the Black Warrior WMA per hunter. The legal hunting hours on the WMA and the Bankhead NF are daylight until 1 pm. This is a change from previously being allowed to hunt all day on the National Forest outside of the WMA. Kevin has observed good turkey hatches over the last few years. Last year, Black Warrior led the state for WMA's as far as the number of recorded turkey harvests. There is good habitat, but we can always use some more nesting habitat. We had a mast crop failure this fall, so this year will be interesting. Kevin also shared about the Black Warrior WMA deer harvest. The harvest was down about 30% this year. The largest public land buck was killed on Black Warrior again this year.

There were questions about turkey decline and the reasons. Numerous reasons including, but not limited to use of decoys, predators, including wild pigs, habitat and that we have twice the number of turkey hunters than we have had in the past.

There was also a question about pig control and allowing the public to trap on public land. There was a discussion about whole sounder removal and the impacts to effective trapping and control when hunting or other than whole sounder removal is employed on the same area. Bankhead biologist Rollins Jolly participated in a recorded webinar on wild pigs and control. It is posted on wildal.org under virtual learning or [here](#) (click the link).

There was discussion on the **white oak planting** and why white oak? There are numerous reasons the Bankhead is collaborating on the white oak planting project at Balls Mountain. White oak is an important habitat component for many species of wildlife. It is less represented in the ecosystem than the other oaks. It is a native species that has been dominant in the uplands on Bankhead. White oak is a predominant component for dry-mesic oak-pine and oak forests communities that are prescribed for restoration in the National Forests in Alabama's [Forest Plan](#). And there's a White Oak Initiative. Part of the White Oak Initiative is related to the whiskey business, which requires white oak barrels. The U.S. Congress even has a white oak (bourbon) caucus. Alabama supports two of the three legs of the bourbon barrel business, if you will, with the staves being made in Stephenson, Alabama and the cooperage for barrels in Decatur. Learn more about them here: [White Oak Caucus](#), [White Oak Initiative](#), and [Brown-Forman](#) (click the links).

Contact Allison Cochran at jera.cochran@usda.gov for copies of power point presentations shared at the March 14, 2023 Bankhead Liaison Panel meeting.