

**Bankhead National Forest  
Liaison Panel  
Meeting Agenda  
Bernice Hilton Walker Building, Traders and Farmers Bank  
Double Springs, Alabama  
December 11, 2018**

<b>6:00</b>	<b>Ranger Welcome, Updates and 2018 Review</b> 2018 Accomplishments 2019 Program Plans	<b>Andy Scott</b> District Ranger, USFS Bankhead
<b>6:15</b>	<b>2019 SPB Mitigation and Restoration Proposal</b>	<b>Jason Harris</b> Silviculturist, USFS, Bankhead
<b>6:30</b>	<b>Feral Swine Program Updates</b>	<b>Travis McDonald</b> Biologist, USFS, Bankhead
<b>7:00</b>	<b>Recreation Program Updates/Trails</b> Houston Rec Area, Brushy Lake Rec Area,  Little Natural Bridge Rec Area, Caney Falls Trail Sipsey Picnic Trail, Soughdahogee Falls, & Payne Creek Trail.	<b>Shane Hoskins</b> Natural Resources Specialist, USFS, Bankhead
<b>7:30</b>	<b>Question and Answer</b>	<b>Andy Scott</b>
<b>8:00</b>	<b>Closeout &amp; Adjourn</b> Next meeting & agenda items Other panel business items	<b>Andy Scott</b>

Meeting Summary, Tuesday, December 11, 2018, Bankhead Liaison Panel Meeting  
Traders and Farmers Bank, Bernice Hilton Walker Building, Double Springs, Alabama

#### Meeting Attendees:

Forest Service Personnel present included Andy Scott, Blake Addison, Jason Harris, Shane Hoskins, Allison Cochran, Travis McDonald, Craig Moore, Paul Richards

Liaison Panel Members present included Randy Feltman, John Howell, Mike Henshaw, Mark Kolinski, James Barnacastle, Anthony Hood, James Alexander.

Others present included Tina and Terry Lewis, Marsha and Roger Robertson, Peter Gossett, Mike Bagwell, Carl Godsey, Betty Denton, Joey Stephenson, Eddie Hand, Bryan Cheatwood, Rusty Cook, Janice Barrett, Chris Cole, Laura and Sam Lewis.

Ranger Andy Scott provided some background on the Bankhead Liaison Panel, which is a community group established in the early 2000's and is a good way to communicate and share projects and get input. Andy reviewed the ground rules and will have an open question and answer session at the end of the meeting to cover topics not on the agenda tonight.

Ranger Andy Scott provided a summary of projects completed in Fiscal Year 2018 and described a few projects planned for Fiscal Year 2019. Copies of the presentation are available on request. Andy updated the group on personnel and hiring. He provided updates on ecosystem restoration and forest health projects, including the southern pine beetle situation. In 2018, about 863 acres were included in four timber sales for a timber volume of about 22,000 ccf. An additional 150 acres of timber were treated by cut and remove in areas with southern pine beetle infestations. About 30,000 ccf of timber were prepared for future sales. In 2019, we plan to offer four-five timber sales covering about 1,000 acres and 25,000-30,000 ccf of timber volume. This is an increase from previous years. In 2018, 18,200 acres were prescribed burned and an additional 224 acres were burned to prepare sites for planting trees. In 2019, we plan to burn about 22,165 acres in 33 blocks and may burn about seven of those blocks during the growing season. Maps of the 2019 burn program were available and will be available on the National Forests in Alabama's website. Other accomplishments include preparing about 400 acres for planting trees, treating about 150 acres of non-native invasive plants, planting 162 acres of shortleaf pine and 114 acres of longleaf pines. Midstory removal on almost 200 acres using herbicide and hand planting native grass seed in three areas took place to restore woodland structure in upland stands. About 100 acres of wildlife openings were treated. Fish habitat structures were installed in Smith lake. Wildlife and rare species monitoring continued and included a variety of species and survey methods throughout the year. Nine new gates were installed to improve wildlife habitat and reduce erosion and illegal riding. Additional areas with erosion problems were rehabilitated and closed by berming. We initiated a project on Lee Creek to replace the road culverts with a structure that will allow fish passage. About 118 miles of roads are planned for ditching and blading and the contract is behind schedule due to rain. About 10 culverts were replaced last year and we spot treated about 10 areas of particularly bad road segments. About 130 miles of roads were maintained cooperatively by Winston and Lawrence Counties. New cooperative road maintenance agreements are in place with both counties and we were able to assist in securing funding and supplemental agreements to further that cooperative road maintenance work. Recreation areas were maintained during 2018, including trail maintenance on Owl Creek and in Sipsey through volunteer and other agreements. Lift station pumps were replaced at Corinth, Houston and Clear Creek, as were shower controls at Corinth. The staff provided public presentations and workshop at over 20 events, including the Fishing Derby, Payne Demo Outdoor Classroom, FAWN, career fairs, etc. Partners continue to provide education to the public at Trailheads around Sipsey and through the Wilderness Ranger program.

Silviculturist Jason Harris provided an update on the 2019 Southern Pine Beetle Mitigation and Restoration Project. Copies of the presentation are available on request. The purpose of the project is to treat pine stands and mixed pine stands that are in potential danger due to the previous Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) outbreak, including overstocked stands, stands with SPB activity, or stands adjacent to stands with SPB activity. The stands may be treated by thinning or clear-cutting and restoring to native forest communities and desired future conditions (DFCs). Timing of this project was shared. Stand prescriptions, field surveys and evaluations are on-going at this time. We expect to make a decision on the project in April and implement immediately.

There was a question on the stands with a hardwood desired future condition and whether we are doing advanced regeneration counts to see if hardwood advanced regeneration is present to help us decide on the appropriate treatment? Yes, and in many cases we will likely be thinning stands to increase advanced regeneration. We will have certain criteria included in the NEPA decision that will identify what criteria will be met/present to regenerate a stand, as opposed to thinning it. This will be a stand by stand decision. There was a concern about leaving too much loblolly in areas to be regenerated to hardwood and that loblolly would naturally seed in to those stands if not removed from the overstory.

There was another question on how the southern pine beetle had affected shortleaf pine stands as opposed to longleaf pine stands. We couldn't discern a difference, as our shortleaf pine stands are quite young still and most of our mature shortleaf pine stands are in mixed pine/oak stands. We did do a quick review and it appeared, for the most part, that southern pine beetle spots were not detected in stands of loblolly pine that had been previously thinned and are being managed in a more open condition.

Biologist Travis McDonald provided an update on the feral swine control program on Bankhead. Copies of the presentation are available upon request. Travis shared the work he has done, in cooperation with USDA Wildlife Services and Alabama Wildlife & Freshwater Fisheries since approximately 2011. The active whole sounder trapping and shooting program has reduced feral swine numbers on Bankhead. About 800 feral pigs have been removed in 7 years of very active management. As pig numbers are reduced, a greater effort is required to remove pigs. In the last two years, about 35 pigs have been removed, but the number of traps and effort have greatly increased. For the future, we hope to continue removing pigs to lower the population density and reduce resource damage and hopefully reduce the control effort to more of a monitoring status with removal taking place only when large sounders are detected. We also hope to invest in more remote traps to increase success and efficiency. At this time, we are considering expanding the feral swine control program into the Sipsey Wilderness. This will require a Minimum Requirements Decision Guide Analysis (MRDG or MRA) and we have begun that process. We seek input and comments on that analysis and document. We will continue working with USDA Wildlife Services for future control needs.

There was a question on whether the population is growing in the Wilderness Area? We don't really know, but it is probably fairly saturated at this time, based on damage and sign that is encountered. There was another question about how far south the feral swine are. We have had a few reports around Smith Lake, but none have been confirmed. They have been seen as far south as Natural Bridge in the Houston and Moreland area. There was a question on whether wilderness volunteers are seeing feral swine. They do report seeing feral swine sign often, but not pigs. There was a question on whether feral swine are dangerous to hikers. One panel member reported being charged by a sow while hunting. But we do not have many reports of hogs charging people. We have had no reports of people being injured by feral swine. There were questions on disease and disease surveillance. Wildlife Services collected blood samples this year to test for disease, but we have not seen those results. Tick research is also on-going with ticks being collected from both feral swine and small mammals. Presence of Rocky Mountain Spotted fever, in addition to other bacteria or tick-borne illnesses was high. There was a question on how many remote traps we have, where we can use cell phones and cameras to trip a trap, and we only have one at this time. There was discussion on the MRDG for trapping in the Sipsey Wilderness Area. It is a process and we invite comments. The process is to determine if we will make a decision to undertake feral swine control in the Wilderness and how that will affect the 5 wilderness values. It will help us identify the minimum tool(s) we need to address the issue and which of those tools has the least number of wilderness prohibited acts. The Regional Forester will likely be the decision maker on this issue.

There was a question about whether we are working on another MRDG process for another action? Andy Scott answered that we are looking at and making sure the Johnson Cemetery Access into the Wilderness for the family access is appropriate and to get it clearly figured out and recorded for the future.

Shane Hoskins, ORA/Natural Resources Specialist, provided a presentation on upcoming recreation projects. In 2019, we plan to work on life ring stations at all three Smith Lake campgrounds (Houston, Clear Creek and Corinth). At Clear Creek and Corinth we will be painting the bathhouses. At Clear Creek, we hope to replace the playground equipment and repave the bike and walking trail. At Houston, we hope to replace the garbage cans in the Day Use Area with animal resistant cans. We hope to hire seasonal employees to help with operations and maintenance of the Smith Lake Campgrounds. At the Owl Creek trail system,

we hope to complete the Brown Loop trail with partners. The trail has been flagged in and we will conduct trail bed maintenance in the future.

We will begin scoping projects to apply for funding for “sustainable recreation projects” at Brushy Lake, Houston and Natural Bridge Recreation Areas. This will focus on aging facilities. We will also apply for “sustainable recreation projects” at Caney Creek Falls trail, Payne Creek trail, Sougahoagdee Falls trail and the Sipsev Picnic trail. Our goal is to designate these as official trails. Each site will be different, but could have at a minimum a trailhead sign and a few parking spots. We will be going through the NEPA process for these sustainable recreation projects this year.

There were questions about the campgrounds schedule and about Houston opening next spring. The campgrounds will operate on the same schedule as they did this year. Houston day use and boat ramp will be open, but the campground will not be open. There were questions about the beaver activity and siltation of Brushy Lake. We do not have plans at this time to do any dredging or improvements to the lake itself at Brushy. It is becoming a wetland due to it silting in, but fishing is still possible and productive there. There were questions on whether we have evaluated alternative routes to Caney Creek Falls and concerns about the parking situation with high visitation at Caney Creek. We have not evaluated other routes at this time, but we will as part of the NEPA process. We will scope these projects to solicit comments and inform the public of our ideas. We do not have a timeline for these projects. Andy Scott provided some background that the Recreation Working Group highlighted one of the major things Bankhead needed was waterfall trails that are outside of the Sipsev Wilderness Area. We have had major parking issues at Caney Falls and we need to find a resolution there due to the high level of use. Adjacent landowners expressed safety concerns. There were questions about the road closure at the Borden Creek Bridge and what is the process to reopen the road for wheel chair access and canoe/kayak drop off, and to close the area to horse trailers. There was a general comment that parking at all of our trailheads could be improved. The Thompson Trailhead kiosk has been destroyed and there was discussion on

replacing it. The Forest Service doesn't have funds to replace it at this time. Wild South has built several kiosks in the past, but they don't currently have any carpenters among their volunteers to take on this project. Andy is looking into the idea of getting National Guard units to help with a small project like this.

Contact [jera.cochran@usda.gov](mailto:jera.cochran@usda.gov) for copies of presentations from this meeting.