

**DECISION NOTICE AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
Facilities Co-Location
Amendment #1
Land and Resource Management Plan
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests**

U.S.D.A. Forest Service – Southern Region
Chattahoochee & Oconee National Forest
Tallulah Ranger District
Rabun County, Georgia

December 2004

Decision

Based on my review of the analysis contained in the Environmental Assessment (EA); which included an analysis of alternatives and the consideration of public comments; I have decided to select Alternative 2 (Boggs-Boen site) for implementation. Alternative 2 would collocate all three facilities on approximately 15 acres of National Forest System Land located on the north side of Boen Creek approximately five miles south of the existing leased Ranger District office. Under Alternative 2, the helibase will be separated from the office/work center compound by approximately a half-mile, with a road connecting the two sites. Facilities will be constructed over the next 5-10 years.

Specifically, the Alternative 2 project location is adjacent to U.S. Highway 441 on the north side of Boen Creek, north of the town of Wiley in Rabun County, Georgia. This alternative responds to both significant issues by co-locating all administrative facilities at the Boggs-Boen site. The terrain on this site is much more favorable than the Proposed Action (Wiley site) location, and road grades from the office to the work center and to the helibase would be less, making supply deliveries and aviation fuel tanker access easier (Issue 1) (EA, page 6). The more gentle terrain would also require much less excavation, making potential sedimentation into Boen Creek or Boggs Branch much less likely (Issue 2) (EA, page 6). Portal (large signs) signing along with approach signs on Highway 441 will provide awareness of the visitor's center and other Forest Service facilities.

The access road from the office/work center compound to the helibase would be constructed partially on Rabun County property. An agreement has already been discussed with Rabun County officials, and they are amenable to it. This agreement would require approval by both Rabun County and the FS.

Alternative 2 (Boggs-Boen site) would amend the 2004 Forest Plan (Amendment #1) by reducing Management Prescription 9.H by approximately 48 acres and increasing Management Prescription 5.A by this same acreage. The 48-acre amount is used for the amendment to make a logically manageable unit of land, including all three administrative facilities and the land in between (EA, page 10). Although the actual

impact area for the complex is approximately 15 acres, the 48 acres creates a logical unit of land for administration. Consolidation of the Ranger District facilities would substantially increase the efficiency of District operations, alleviate safety concerns related to the current helibase site, eliminate environmental concerns associated with the work center, and eliminate the annual leasing cost associated with the office. This alternative would address the significant issues by locating the facilities and access roads in an area with more favorable topography. Consequently, the steeper road grades and potential erosion and sedimentation issues would be alleviated.

Mitigation measures, which are steps taken to lessen the environmental impact of the project, will include the following items from the Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the Chattahoochee & Oconee National Forests and Georgia's Best Management Practices (BMP's):

1. Potential erosion and sedimentation would be mitigated by the use of BMPs during clearing operations, construction designs based on watershed management standards set forth in the Forest Plan, and the implementation of standard erosion and sedimentation control measures in accordance with the *Georgia Manual for Erosion and Sedimentation Control*. Erosion control measures would include the installation of silt fences, hay bales, and/or brush barriers around construction areas to prevent sediment from moving off-site. In addition, exposed soils would be promptly disked, fertilized, and seeded to prevent soil erosion. Paved parking areas and paved or gravel roads would provide long-term protection against erosion. Monitoring and timely maintenance procedures conducted in accordance with Access/Road Management standards set forth in the Forest Plan would also minimize erosion from roads and parking areas after completion of the project.
2. Potential impacts to area streams would be implemented using mitigation measures in Management Prescription # 11, *Riparian Corridor*. In accordance with the standards set forth in this prescription, a minimum 100-foot riparian buffer would be maintained along all streams in the vicinity of the project, and road crossings would be designed and constructed to minimize effects on streams (EA, page 10).
3. Potential impacts to scenic resources would be mitigated by the implementation of ecological treatment standards for urban and naturally appearing landscape areas. Ecological treatment standards for the site would include 1) enhancement of fall color species through practices such as selective tree removal and the retention of visually attractive trees and shrubs; 2) creation of a park-like effect within the existing pine or pine-hardwood stands; 3) featuring flowering trees, character trees, and shrub species; and 4) maintenance of trees to enhance visual quality (e.g. limbing up trees, removal of leaning/bent over trees, variable density feathering, etc.). Additional ecological treatment standards would be applied to tree maintenance, road construction, and road maintenance. A natural vegetative buffer would be maintained between the project area and U.S. Highway 441. The vegetative buffer combined with the existing topography of the site would minimize visibility of the work center portion of the facilities from the highway.

Reasons for the Decision

I have selected the Alternative 2 (Boggs-Boen site) over the Proposed Action and No Action alternatives for the following reasons:

1. Alternative 2 responds to both significant issues by co-locating all administrative facilities at the Boggs-Boen site. The terrain on this site is much more gentle than the Proposed Action (Wiley Site) location, and road grades from the office to the work center and to the helibase would be less, making supply deliveries and aviation fuel tanker access easier and safer (Issue 1). The more gentle terrain would also require much less excavation, making potential sedimentation into Boen Creek or Boggs Branch far less likely (Issue 2).
2. Consolidation of the Ranger District facilities under Alternative 2 (Boggs-Boen site) would meet the purpose and need by substantially increasing the efficiency of District operations, alleviating safety concerns related to the current helibase site, eliminating environmental concerns associated with the work center, and eliminating the annual leasing cost associated with the current office (EA, page 10).

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need of the facilities co-location is to increase the efficiency of District operations, alleviate safety concerns related to the current helibase site, eliminate environmental concerns associated with the current work center site, and eliminate the high annual leasing cost associated with the office. Currently, the Tallulah Ranger District office is located on the south side of Clayton, Georgia; the work center is located approximately two miles north of the office on the north side of Clayton; and the helibase is located approximately 12 road miles west of Clayton on Glassy Mountain. Over the course of the past several years, inspections and reviews of the administrative sites have identified numerous limitations that are impairing the safe, efficient, and/or cost-effective operation of these facilities. These limitations are detailed below.

The location of the present helibase is confronted with unique problems associated with the weather. While the present site is exceptional for operations in good weather, its location on the top of the mountain, at over 3,400 feet in elevation, makes it more vulnerable than other lower-elevation sites to high winds, hail, lightening, and fog or low clouds. Lightening strikes and/or storm damage frequently interrupt phone and base radio communications, and the helicopter must be moved prior to storms that may contain hail. Fog or low clouds cause assignments to be delayed several times per year.

In a recent review by the Regional Aviation Officer, the current helibase site was noted as having inadequate emergency landing areas surrounding it. This means that there are no reasonably level open areas (e.g. fields or road right-of-ways) that could be used for an emergency landing near the helibase. This same review noted that crew quarters are not adequate. Occasionally, water quality at the helibase is poor and availability is lacking because of an inadequate water system.

Currently, the parking lot and the buildings at the work center are not compliant with the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Steps, narrow hallways, inadequate restrooms, and a sloping parking lot are examples of the ADA violations.

The general location of each of the facilities causes access problems for FS personnel and for the public. For example, the District office is located at the edge of a commercial business district in Clayton and is not readily distinguished by the public as a FS facility, causing the public some difficulty in finding the office. Also, departing the parking lot southbound from the District office has become both difficult and dangerous because of continuous high volumes of traffic moving in both directions on U.S. Highway 441. Access to the work center is hampered by the narrowness of the only access road that leads to the center and by commercial vehicles that sometimes block the road. Remoteness of the present helibase causes problems with ground access for fuel trucks, emergency response vehicles, and hazardous materials response vehicles. In addition, the steepness of the grade on the road that leads to the helibase, and the fact that the road is one-lane (with turn-outs), also causes access concerns.

There also is an issue of cost with the present facilities. The District office is located in a leased building, costing approximately \$71,000 in rent each year (amount is a recently awarded lease rate, with the award coming after release of the EA.) It is expected that a new lease in Clayton could increase to approximately \$110,000. Buildings at both the Glassy Mountain helibase and the work center are old and need major modifications. These costs are estimated at approximately \$742,000.

In addition, there are security concerns associated with the existing facilities. The existing work center is not gated or fenced, and consequently, is susceptible to vandalism and/or equipment theft. The access road to the Glassy Mountain helibase is gated, but the helibase itself is not fenced. Since the helibase is not continuously staffed, the helicopter is susceptible to vandalism or sabotage. Additional security measures are needed to alleviate these potential security problems.

In summary, co-location of the administrative facilities on the Tallulah District is needed to alleviate a variety of concerns. Co-location to National Forest System lands is needed in order to reduce the annual lease cost. Co-location within Rabun County is desired by the Forest Service, Rabun County, City of Clayton, and Chamber of Commerce, in order to continue to serve the county and provide swift initial attack response to wildland fires. The Tallulah District is responsible for initial attack on both National Forest System lands as well as all other ownerships in Rabun County, making a location central to the county very important. Since much of the recreational traffic approaches from the Atlanta area, a co-located site on the east side of U.S. Highway 441 would be most easily accessible, and therefore is highly desirable over sites on the west side or located away from this main thoroughfare.

Public Involvement and Issue Identification

Internal and external scoping involved resource professionals and interested members of the public and is documented in the EA (pages 58-61). The EA includes a list of all agencies, persons, and organizations contacted in the course of scoping and environmental analysis (pages 58-61). The project has been listed continuously on the quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions since October 2001. A scoping letter was mailed out to 64 persons and organizations on November 23, 2001. Several responses were received and these concerns along with others were used to compose a preliminary list of issues.

An interdisciplinary (ID) team was appointed to analyze the issues that were received from the public and from within the agency. Significant issues (listed below) were recommended to the Forest Supervisor by the ID team. These issues were approved by the Forest Supervisor, who is the responsible official for this project (see Issues/Alternatives sign-off document in project file). The FS separated the issues into two groups: significant and non-significant issues. Significant issues were defined as those directly or indirectly caused by implementing the Proposed Action.

1. Topography on the proposed Wiley site would require relatively high road grades, especially between the office and the work center, potentially making supply deliveries (including deliveries by tractor trailers and aviation fuel tankers) difficult, less safe, and possibly causing impassable conditions during severe winter weather.
2. Excavation on the terrain at the proposed Wiley site would be extensive and may cause sedimentation into Boen Creek, thus decreasing water quality by increasing turbidity, imbeddedness, and nutrient content.

Additional non-significant issues were identified as those: 1) outside the scope of the Proposed Action; 2) already decided by law, regulation, Forest Plan, or other higher level decision; 3) irrelevant to the decision to be made; 4) conjectural and not supported by scientific or factual evidence, or 5) not in conflict with the proposal and/or the purpose and need. An additional four issues were determined to be non-significant. These issues and the rationale for identifying them as non-significant are described in detail in the EA (pages 6-7).

Alternatives to the Proposed Action

In addition to the selected course of action [Alternative 2 (Boggs-Boen Site)], the original Proposed Action (Wiley Site) and a No Action alternative (Alternative 1) were analyzed in the EA. The Proposed Action (Wiley Site) and the No Action alternative (Alternative 1) are described below:

The Proposed Action - Wiley Site

The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests originally proposed the relocation of the Tallulah Ranger District office, work center, and helibase to a common location (Wiley site) on National Forest System Land in Rabun County, Georgia. This proposal would amend the 2004 Forest Plan (Amendment #1) by removing approximately 20 acres from Management Prescription 9.H and placing those acres into Management Prescription 5.A – Administrative Sites. The Proposed Action would co-locate all three facilities on approximately 20 acres of National Forest System Land located approximately six miles south of the existing Ranger District office. The proposed project site is adjacent to U.S. Highway 441 on the south side of Boen Creek, just north of the community of Wiley in Rabun County, Georgia. The Proposed Action (Wiley Site) would include clearing areas within this 20-acre area by removing or disposing of trees and brush, completing earthwork to prepare the areas for building construction, and the actual construction of the facilities themselves. Connected to this action would be the installation of pipes, overhead or underground wires, and/or the drilling of a well to provide water and electricity and the proper disposal of solid waste. Consolidation of the District facilities would substantially increase the efficiency of District operations, alleviate safety concerns related to the current helibase site, eliminate environmental concerns associated with the work center, and eliminate the annual leasing cost associated with the office.

Alternative 1 - No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, current Management Prescriptions would continue to guide management of the project area. No co-location of facilities would be implemented to accomplish project goals. The existing Tallulah Ranger District office, work center, and helibase would continue to be utilized at their current locations.

Alternatives Considered and Eliminated from Detailed Consideration

In addition to the project alternatives described above, the following alternatives were considered during the initial phases of the development of alternatives in response to the issues. The ID Team considered these alternatives but did not bring them forward for detailed study. Reasons for not considering them in detail are given.

Locate all facilities to the Tiger site. The Tiger site is located on “old” U.S. Highway 441 south of Tiger, Georgia. This alternative would not meet the Purpose and Need of the project, which includes providing ready access to the “new” U.S. Highway 441. Consequently, this alternative was eliminated from detailed consideration.

Locate all facilities to the Bogg’s Mountain Site. This alternative site is located just north of the Boggs – Boen site across Boggs Branch on land currently owned by Lamar Edwards. This alternative would require acquisition by purchase or exchange of an expensive tract of land and, given the current levels of funding for this type of acquisition, has a remote possibility of actually getting done in the next decade. Consequently, this alternative is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Locate the office at the present work center, continue using the present work center, and locate the helibase at the Wiley site. This would require building in a floodplain and moving or demolishing existing buildings at the work center site. Consequently, this alternative is considered clearly unreasonable and is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Locate the helibase at Heaven's Landing, a private airport located in the vicinity of the Germany community about five miles northwest of Clayton, and keep the office and work center at their present locations. This alternative would not achieve full co-location, and so it does not fully meet the purpose and need for the project. In addition, there would be conflict with light aircraft traffic at Heaven's Landing, and there is no communication tower at Heaven's Landing. Consequently, there is the potential for damage to the helicopters, as well as other safety issues. Due to these unsafe conditions, this alternative is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Locate the helibase at the Habersham County Airport, and keep the office and work center at their present locations. This alternative would not achieve full co-location, and so it does not fully meet the purpose and need for the project. It also would place part of the wildland fire protection force outside of Rabun County, causing delays in initial attack responses. In addition, there would be a conflict with light aircraft traffic at the airport, and there is no communication tower at the airport. Consequently, there is the potential for damage to the helicopters, as well as other safety issues. For all of these reasons, this alternative is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Locate all facilities to Tallulah Falls, across U.S. Highway 441 from Victory Home. Tallulah Falls is outside of Rabun County, and therefore, is not centrally located to serve the public adequately. Locating the facilities at this location would increase the response time for initial attack by both ground and air forces, and would leave Rabun County with no centrally located wildland fire suppression crew. In addition, locating the facilities at this location would risk alienating the Rabun County Chamber of Commerce, as well as the City of Clayton and Rabun County officials. Letters from all three of these entities oppose movement of the office outside of the county (see project file). The new facilities must be centrally located to serve the local community and the visiting public. This alternative is clearly unreasonable and is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Locate all facilities for both the Tallulah and Chattooga Ranger Districts in Tallulah Falls, across Highway 441 from Victory Home, except for the visitor's center, which would remain in Clayton. This alternative would involve consolidation with the Chattooga Ranger District, currently located in Clarkesville. Consolidation is clearly outside the scope of this decision, and recent analysis indicates that co-location of the two Ranger Districts would not meet the needs of both communities (see project file). This alternative would, in effect, move a second District office (Chattooga) out of a community (Clarkesville). Location of the Chattooga District office at Tallulah Falls places the contact point for most Forest visitors (approaching from the south) on that District past the entire District boundary by the time they reach the office. In addition, this alternative does not meet the main purpose and need for co-location of facilities. Consequently, this alternative is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Locate the office and helibase at the Wiley site, and keep the work center at the present location. The work center is in a floodplain. Continuing to use this facility is not consistent with NEPA or Executive Order 11988 (*Floodplain Management*). In addition,

this alternative does not meet the main purpose and need for co-location of facilities. Consequently, this alternative is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Locate the office and helibase at Bogg's Mountain, and keep the work center at the present location. The work center is in a floodplain. Continuing to use this facility is not consistent with NEPA or Executive Order 11988 (*Floodplain Management*). In addition, this alternative does not meet the main purpose and need for co-location of facilities. Consequently, this alternative is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Purchase or acquire land through an exchange for the office and work center, and locate the helibase at the Wiley site. Due to its speculative and non-specific nature, this alternative is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Purchase the existing office building, and locate the work center and helibase at the Wiley site. Recent communications with the landlord indicate that they are not willing to sell the existing office building. In addition, this alternative does not meet the main purpose and need for co-location of facilities. Consequently, this alternative is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

Purchase the existing office building, continue to use the present work center, and locate the helibase to the Wiley site. Recent communications with the landlord indicate that they are not willing to sell the present office building. Also, the work center would continue to be located partially in a floodplain. In addition, this alternative does not meet the main purpose and need for co-location of facilities. Consequently, this alternative is hereby eliminated from detailed consideration.

In addition, two other sites were examined for acreage availability and feasibility. These included an area just north of Clayton on the west side of U.S. Highway 441 and a site located near Eastman Mountain on Boggs Mountain Road. Both of these locations were found to not meet the purpose and need of being on or close to the east side of U.S. Highway 441 and were dropped from detailed consideration

Findings Under the National Forest Management Act or other Laws and Regulations

Alternative 2 (Boggs-Boen site) would amend the 2004 Forest Plan (Amendment #1) by reducing Management Prescription 9.H by approximately 48 acres and increasing Management Prescription 5.A by this same acreage.

Other than the Forest Plan amendment detailed above, this alternative is consistent with the Forest Plan. The co-location of facilities under Alternative 2 is consistent with management objectives and standards and guidelines, including Forestwide and MA direction.

Alternative 2 complies with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b) by following the standards and guidelines and mitigating measures in the Forest Plan (EA, page 13).

Alternative 2 follows all Georgia BMPs and complies with the Clean Water Act (EA, page 13).

Alternative 2 complies with the Recreational Fisheries Executive Order by employing aquatic conservation measures for the reduction of sediment into watercourses (EA, pages 28-33).

Finding of No Significant Impact

During the evaluation of environmental effects all foreseeable actions that may cause direct, indirect or cumulative effects were analyzed for Alternative 2 (Boggs-Boen site), the Proposed Action (Wiley Site), and the No Action alternative (EA, pages 18-57).

Based on the process and analysis shown in the EA, I have determined that implementation of Alternative 2, with the associated mitigation measures, is not a major Federal action, either individually or cumulatively, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not needed.

This determination is based on the following factors:

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered, and Alternative 2 will not have a significant effect on the quality of the environment (EA, pages 18-57).
2. Alternative 2 will not adversely affect public health or safety (EA noise analysis, pages 27-28).
3. Alternative 2 will not have any adverse effects on any unique characteristics of the geographical area [historic or archaeological resources (EA, pages 46-49), wetlands and floodplains (EA, pages 33-37), old-growth forests (EA, page 38), water resources (EA, pages 28-33), scenic resources (EA, pages 51-54), etc.].
4. The effects of Alternative 2 on the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. A cumulative effects analysis of additional foreseeable projects has been completed (EA, pages 18-57), and there are no expected significant effects.
5. Alternative 2 does not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks. The Regional and Forest Engineering staff and the Zone Engineering Technician are very familiar with projects like this and the effects have been disclosed in the EA.

6. This decision does not set a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. Decisions for any of the other foreseeable actions within the watershed will not be affected by this decision.
7. Cumulative effects of the actions in Alternative 2 and other foreseeable actions have been evaluated throughout the (EA, pages 18-57). There will be no significant cumulative effects between this project and other ongoing or planned projects on either national forest or private land. The effects of other foreseeable future actions as well as past actions and ongoing actions were included in the analysis (see Cumulative Effects analyses for specific resource categories under Environmental Consequences sections in EA).
8. No known sites listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places will be adversely affected by Alternative 2 (EA, pages 46-49).
9. Implementing Alternative 2 will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or result in the loss of any species viability or create significant trends toward Federal listing under the Endangered Species Act. This is based upon the findings of site-specific inventories of the project area and analyses contained in a Biological Evaluation (EA, pages 42-46).
10. Alternative 2 will not threaten to lead to violations of federal, state, or local environmental laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. This will be ensured by carrying out the construction in a manner that is consistent with the standards and guidelines, management requirements and mitigation measures established in the Forest Plan (EA, page 13).

Implementation and Appeal Rights

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.11 by those who provided substantive comments in this particular proposal during the 30-day public comment period. Written notice of appeal of this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14 "Content of an Appeal," and must be postmarked or received within 45 days following the publication date of the legal notice in the Gainesville Times. Appeals must be submitted to Regional Forester, USDA Forest Service, ATTN: Appeals, 1720 Peachtree Road, N.W., Suite 811N, Atlanta, GA 30309.

This decision will not be implemented until at least 5 business days after the close of the appeal period, or 15 days after the disposition of the last appeal, whichever comes later.

Construction of the road from the office/work center complex to the helibase will depend on approval of an agreement with Rabun County allowing for a small portion of the road right-of-way to be placed on county property. Rabun County has given a verbal

commitment to this agreement, and it is expected that a final signed agreement would not interfere with the planned implementation of this decision.

For further information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Steve Cole at the Tallulah Ranger District, 809 Highway 441 South, Clayton, GA 30525; or by telephone at (706) 782-3320; or by e-mail at sncole@fs.fed.us.

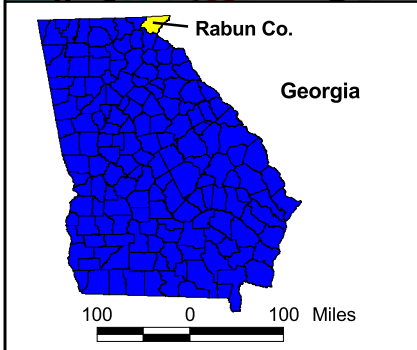
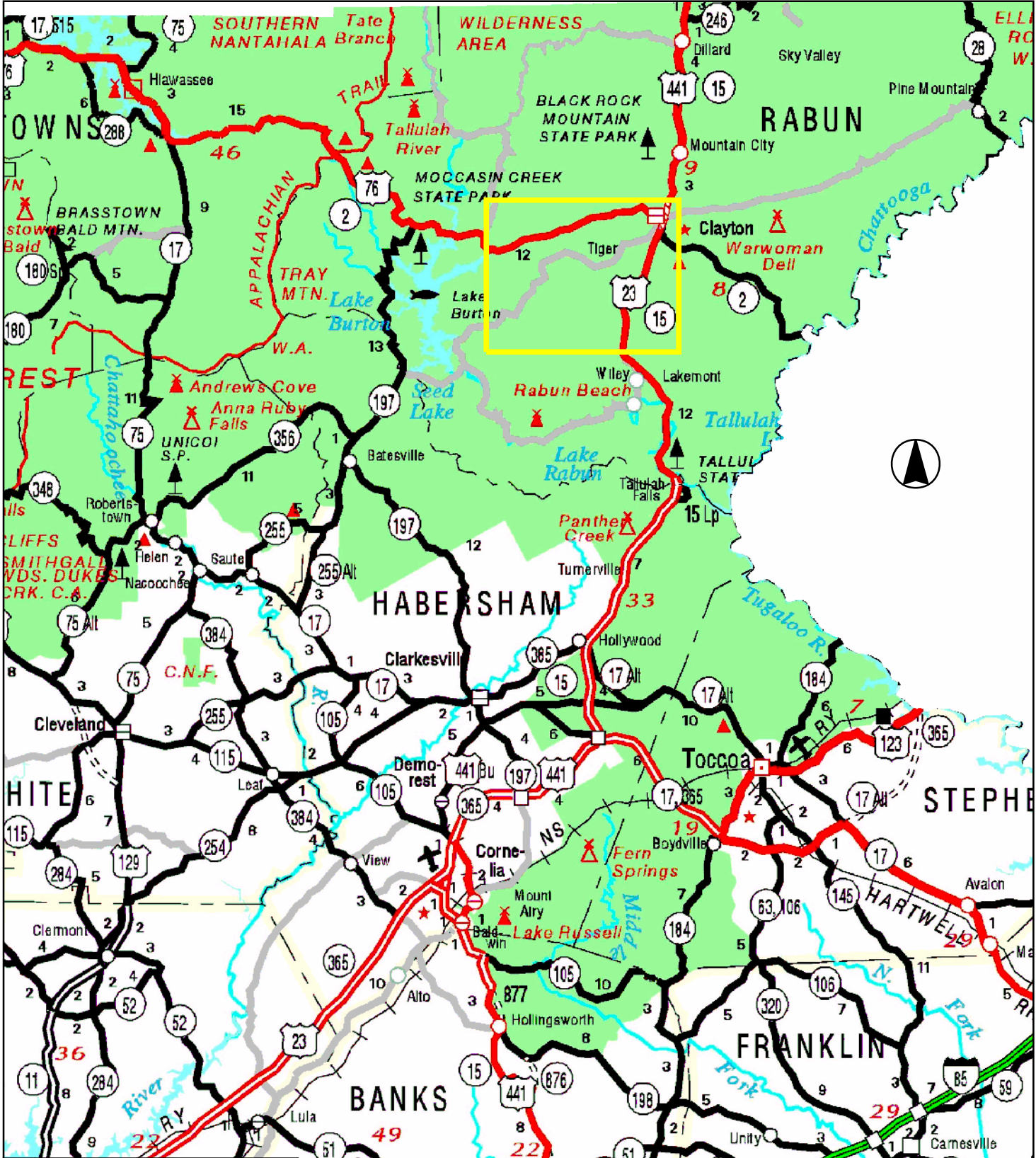
Responsible Official:

/s/ Kathleen Atkinson

Kathleen Atkinson
Forest Supervisor

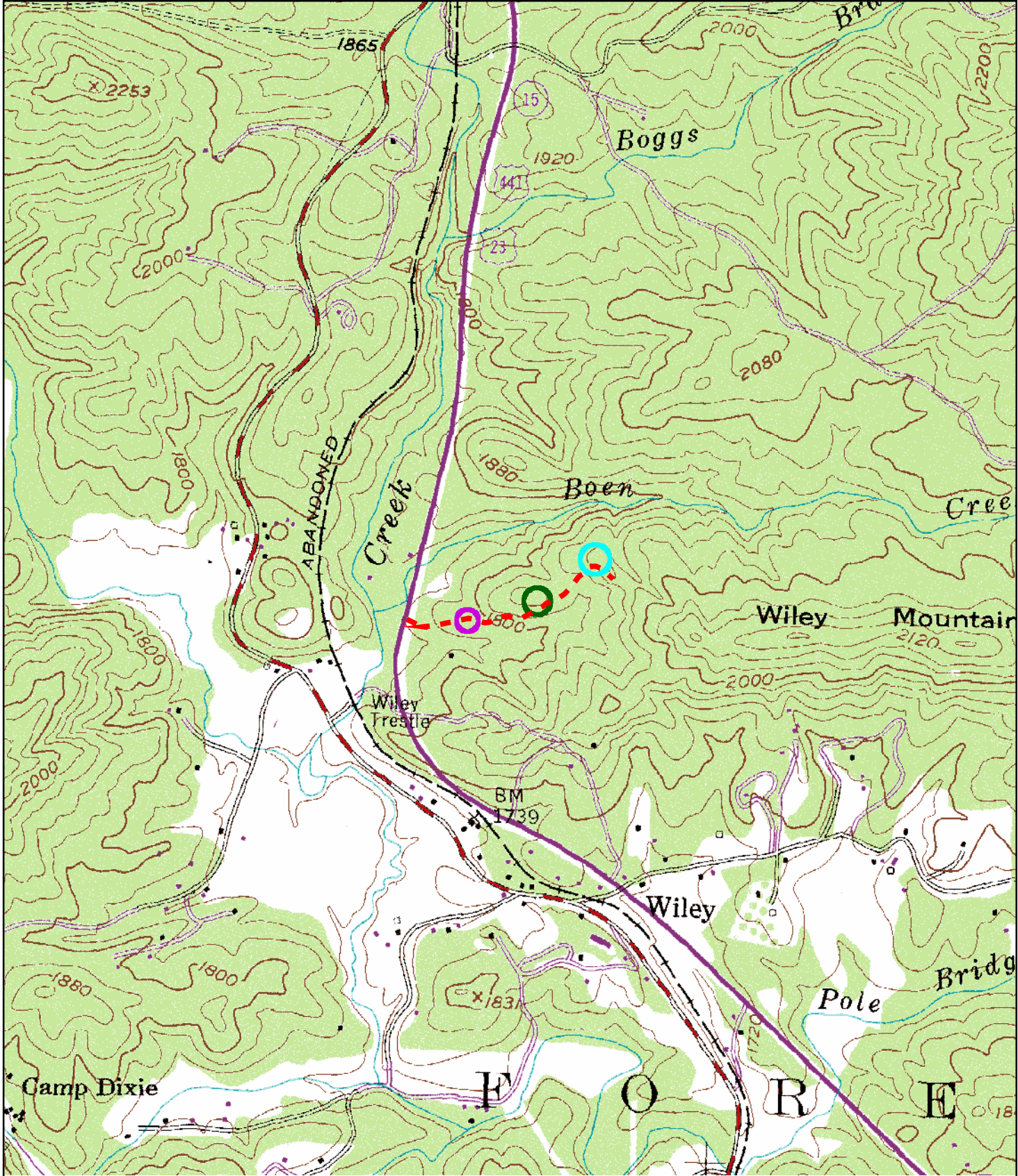
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

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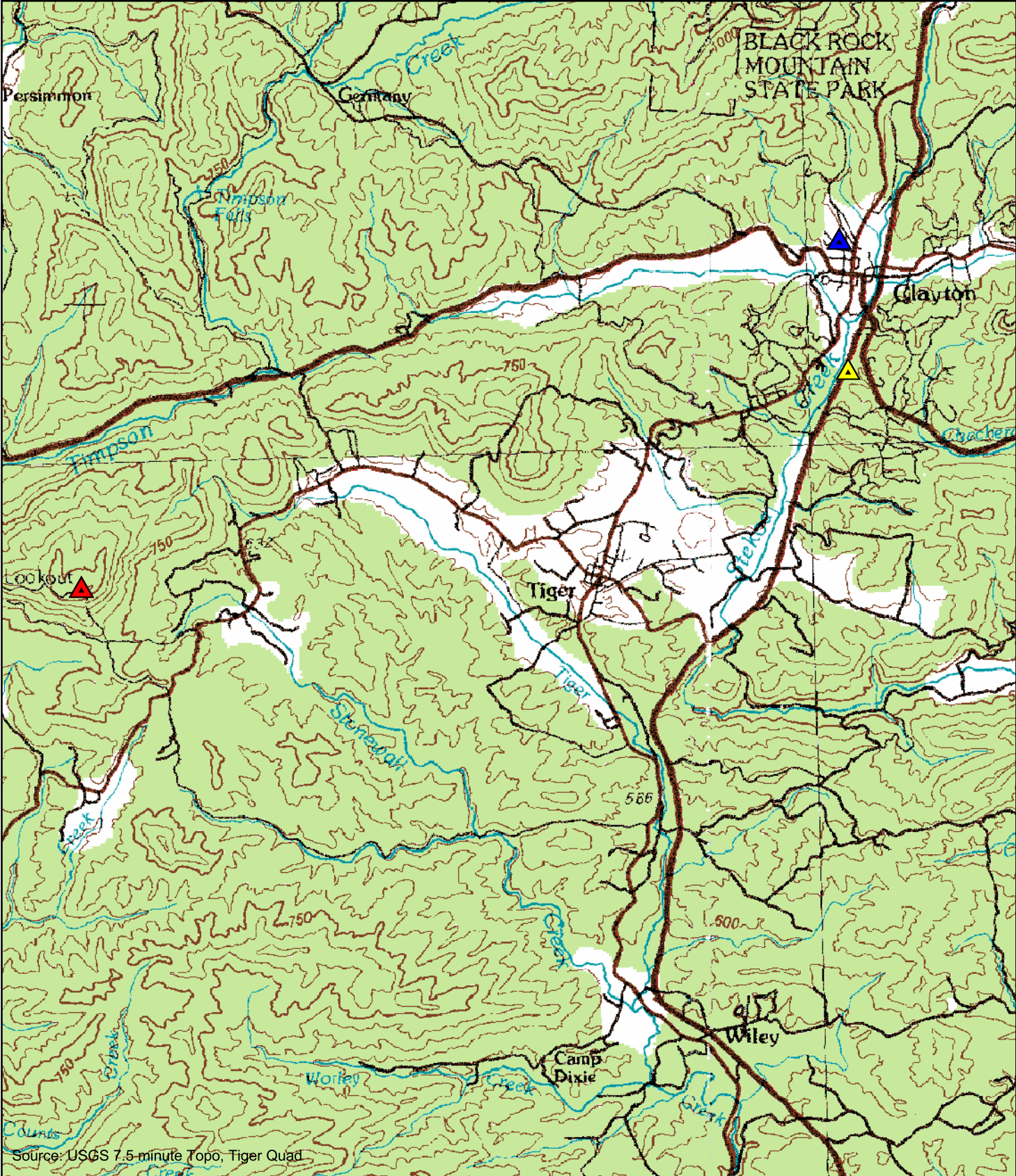
Project Area Location

Project Area Location map	
Facilities Co-Location, Tallulah Ranger District, Chattahoochee National Forest, Rabun, County, Georgia	
Date: March 2004	Drawn By: MR
DIAL CORDY AND ASSOCIATES INC. <small>Environmental Consultants</small>	Approved By: RI
	J01-529
Figure 1	






	Access road	
	Proposed workcenter location	
	Proposed helibase location	
	Proposed district office	
		

Proposed Action: Co-location of facilities at the Wiley Site	
Facilities Co-Location, Tallulah Ranger District, Chattahoochee National Forest, Rabun County, Georgia	
Scale: 1 inch = 1,250 feet	Drawn By: MR
Date: June 2004	Approved By: RI
 DIAL CORDY AND ASSOCIATES INC. <small>ENVIRONMENTAL CONSULTANTS</small>	J01-529
	Figure 2



Alternative 1 (No Action)

-  Existing Helibase
-  Existing Office
-  Existing Workcenter



1 0 1 Miles

Alternative 1 (No Action): Existing locations of office, workcenter, and helibase

Facilities Co-Location, Tallulah Ranger District, Chattahoochee National Forest, Rabun, County, Georgia

Date: June 2004

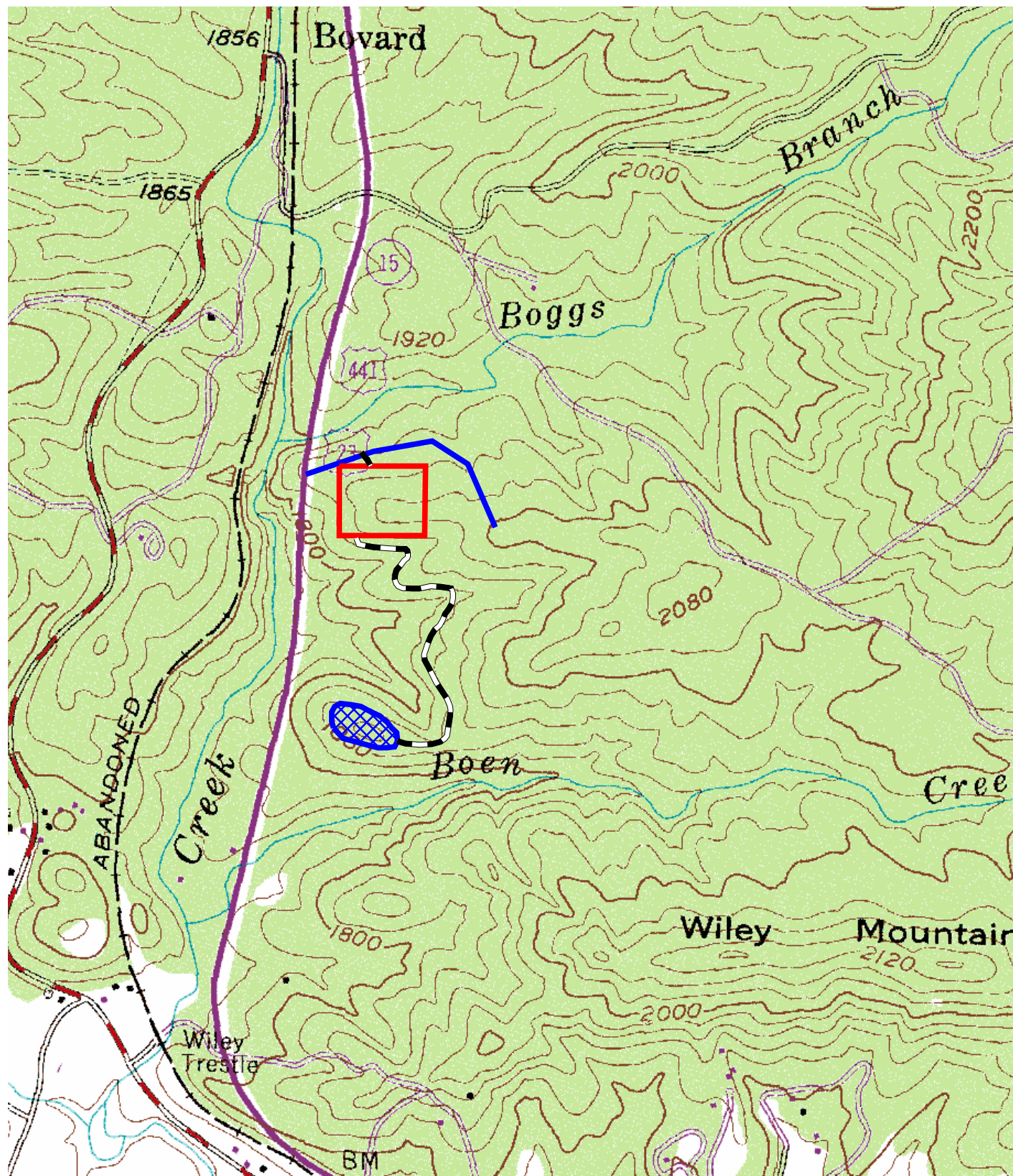
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Figure 3



Source: USGS 7.5' Topographic Map, Tiger Quad

Access Road
 Proposed Helibase and office sites
 Proposed office/work center site
 Proposed helibase site
 Planned County Road

1000 0 1000 2000 Feet

Alternative 2: Co-location of facilities at the Boggs-Boen Site

Facilities Co-Location, Tallulah Ranger District,
Chattahoochee National Forest, Rabun, County, Georgia

Scale: 1 inch = 1,000 feet	Drawn By: MR
Date: June 2004	Approved By: RI
J01-529	
Figure 4	