

Meeting Summary
Bankhead Liaison Panel December 9, 2021

The following people attended a virtual meeting of the Bankhead Liaison Panel in the Microsoft Teams environment.

Forest Service employees District Ranger Andy Scott, Silviculturist Jason Harris, Timber Management Assistant Blake Addison, Natural Resources Specialist Shane Hoskins, Fire Management Officer Kerry Clark, Wildlife Biologist Allison Cochran, Wildlife Biologist Rollins Jolly, Recreation Program Manager Jody Tetlow and Forestry Technician Nathan Hatch. Liaison Panel members Mark Kolinski, Chuck Byrd, and James Alexander.

Members of the public Tim Dixon, Jim Abernathy, Kim Waites, Mike Bagwell, Maggie Johnston, Derek Alkire, Wes Stone, Janice Barrett, Nicole Kyle, David Langham, Greg Meiman, Jack Farrell and Roger Robertson. Additional members of the public joined by phone and names were not recorded.

Ranger Scott gave general updates on the Bankhead National Forest including Winter Storm Uri impacts and employees working away on temporary details, employees from other units working on Bankhead on temporary details and the Bankhead's western fire support this year. He also shared our prescribed burning plans for 2022 in map form.

Shane Hoskins shared updates from the recreation program, including upcoming projects at the Brushy Recreation Day Use Area including patch repairing the viewing/fishing pier and repairs to the water system, and opening for 2022 season and at the Houston Recreation Area replacing the damaged courtesy pier utilizing Great American Outdoor Act (GAOA) funding and opening the swimming beach for the 2022 season. Other projects respectively; included new fee tube and sign upgrades; and Recreation Enhancement Act Fee proposals to increase and align fees at certain recreation areas across the National Forests in Alabama. There will be an additional public engagement period on the fee proposal.

Recreation Questions – Greg Meiman – Does the Forest Service plan to dredge Brushy Lake? The Forest Service is not currently planning to dredge Brushy Lake.

Wes Stone – Is there any plan to clean up the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) pavilion site at Sipsev?

We are discussing ideas on how to interpret the CCC story and working on the best way to do that. We are in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office, and they sent out historic architects to review and reports are still outstanding. That will help inform where we might go.

Wes Stone - I know they can't rebuild the old CCC pavilion at Sipsev Rec site, but perhaps a historic marker might be appropriate (like the Cheatham Road sign). As far as cleaning it up, that doesn't seem too hard as close as it is to the parking area. I hope for safety's sake, the BNF will try to get the debris removed by this summer.

Question on fee proposal – Tim – Day Use pass – What does that include? NFS in AL day use pass – annual pass for your windshield that gets you entrance to standard amenity day use sites like Sipsey, Brushy, etc. – does not cover camping, shooting ranges, or OHV trails. Any proposal for military members to get in for reduced price? Military vets and active can access the America the Beautiful passes and you can access those same sites – for all BLM, Corps, NPS, etc. That’s a separate pass you can get now in our office.

Blake Addison, Timber Management Assistant and Allison Cochran gave updates on road maintenance and soil and water project improvements. The Bankhead staff have been conducting road repair and maintenance using staff and rented equipment. Gravel spreading, grading and ditch repair and culvert cleaning has been ongoing since September.

An aquatic organism passage is in progress on Forest Service Road 254 on a tributary to Brushy Creek (Shirley’s Mill Branch) to replace two failed culverts with a bottomless concrete box culvert that will accommodate fish passage up and downstream of the site.

Due to ongoing issues with erosion due to illegal vehicular traffic along the TVA power transmission line on the north end of the Bankhead, an erosion control project was conducted along the power line and Forest Service Road 249S. A gate was installed, per the Motor Vehicle Use Map, on 249S. This is a year-round closure. Another gate should be installed at the beginning of 249S at the intersection with 249, per the Motor Vehicle Use Map, that would be open seasonally. Additional erosion control is needed at the site, in addition to law enforcement. A similar project will occur on 249V.

Questions from the public

Regarding the Road 254 culvert replacement project Chuck Byrd - are there fish migration benefits for the open box culvert?

Yes, we identified the site as a fish passage barrier due to perched culvert prior to the culvert collapse.

Wes Stone - I think the fish passage is better with the new culvert design. Certainly, better than a collapsing culvert.

Maggie Johnston with Wild Alabama asked about the road work and culvert project - Thrilled to see road work happening. What BMPS (hay bales, fences) were used around the ditches. So many issues with sediment washing into the Sipsey fork causing issues with flattened musk turtle, etc.

The 254 project is a tributary to Brushy and we had the contractor's install sandbags, straw wattles, silt fence and pump the water around with screens to keep aquatic species from being taken in the pump. For general road work, those culverts were mostly not in streams and we relied on leaf litter for filtering. Cleaning out the culverts and doing road maintenance will help with sediment reaching streams.

Silviculturist Jason Harris presented some updates on Citizen Science Projects including the Hemlock Monitoring Project and the White Oak Project. Jason shared maps of where hemlock monitoring is currently occurring and a discussion on learning from Georgia's Save the Hemlocks program to potentially expand monitoring and treatment when the hemlock wooly adelgid arrives. On the white oak project, numerous students and partners have been collecting acorns, which will be grown into seedlings and planted in the Balls Mountain Timber Sale in 2023. About 12,000 acorns have been collected. The Southern Research Station is a lead partner and will study the planting and growth of the trees. We greatly appreciate all partners, volunteers, and participants for help with these projects. Through great public engagement like this we can accomplish shared goals.

Maggie Johnston commented on the Citizen Science projects – Wild Alabama is happy to work with this team on citizen science project with the Forest Service, schools and scouts.

Mark Kolinski asked about the HWA monitoring – What kind of action plan for when or expanding our early warning system actually turns up the HWA on the forest? – Years ago, there was an EA prepared and don't remember a lot about it/practical plans for what to do when it happens. Speed will be of the essence in response. What's the HWA response action plan?

The Bankhead will be using the EA we have in place – have the ability to use imidacloprid for stem/tablet form and for biological control. That EA is up for review. Talking with Donna with Georgia Save the Hemlocks about on ideas and things we could adapt and include in our plan/any updated EA.

WES Stone -Dr. Schweitzer would tell you those acorns could be immersed in water to remove those that float for an initial viability test. Yes, this has been done by Dr. Schweitzer with students, lead scientist on the project.

WES Stone – Jaime Van Clief with American Chestnut Foundation contacted us at AAMU to identify remaining chestnuts in Alabama as they have the ability now to use molecular genetics to increase blight resistance in native chestnuts. So, my staff will be sharing locations of some chestnuts in the BNF they are aware of. Maybe citizens are aware of others that the ACF could add to their genome database from this very diverse area of their geographic range. We would like to coordinate with you on that in the coming year.

Silviculturist Jason Harris presented the Pinetucky Longleaf Woodland Project, a new proposal to restore longleaf pine woodlands and improve Northern Bobwhite habitat on the southern portion of Bankhead.

Wildlife Biologist Allison Cochran presented on a stewardship end-result contracting proposal that is being developed to implement the Pinetucky Longleaf Woodland Project, as well as address forest health, specifically Southern Pine Beetle, issues. Collaboration, partnership, and input are sought. The Forest Service expects to host a field trip for potential contractors and partners in 2022.

WES Stone - I like these ideas, but would invasive plant control be accomplished by herbicide use or cutting (or both)? We can discuss later.

WES Stone - Stewardship contracts may provide an additional incentive (forest products like timber, firewood, pine straw, etc.) to thin stands of trees that would be a way to restore woodlands with lower basal area that has grass for bobwhite quail and other grassland birds.

There was discussion on the ability to designate trees without marking, what it means and why this would be beneficial. There are mechanisms like designation by description and designation by prescription that allow the forest service to sell timber without painting trees. This is not likely to be used in the stewardship proposal or associated contracts.

Dr. Stone described it – like slot limits for fishing on Smith Lake? Take all hardwood trees between 6-10 inches DBH for example?

Janice Barrett - Wild Alabama - Outside of the areas that already have a desired future condition for Longleaf pine, will more pine and oak woodlands be created than would be created without this stewardship project?

No, that is not expected that many new acres of woodland would be designated that aren't already planned for woodland restoration.

WES Stone replied Good Question Janice Barrett. Who knows how many parties would like to contract to do these until you try it. Maybe some estimate from other forests that have these going already might provide one estimate for the amount of land that might be affected, but things might be different on this district.

Janice Barrett - Wild Alabama -How does the non-marking method protect species such as dogwood?

By description is how the trees would be retained.

Chuck Byrd with TNC shared that TNC uses that method of not marking trees on their lands and it is very effective and cost efficient. There is a lot of work that goes into ensuring the desired results are achieved and a lot of trust with the purchaser and loggers. They get a good product out of it on TNC lands.

Mark Kolinski asked for updated acres of longleaf that has been planted (since 2002) We guesstimate in the 1000s of acres but will get him a better figure.

Mark Kolinski asked about the challenges associated with creating woodlands and how will stewardship help.

Woodland creation will still be challenging, but the ability to use the funds from other areas to do all those extra treatments like midstory, etc. will be helpful in creating and maintaining woodlands.

Wildlife Biologist Allison Cochran presented an updated on feral swine control in the Sipsey Wilderness Area. A Minimum Requirements Decision Guide has been approved by the Regional Forester and trapping will begin in mid-January.

WES Stone - Any plan on using nitrate in baits?

No, no chemical methods are proposed on Bankhead for feral swine control.

Janice Barrett - Wild Alabama - How will the trails be cleared for access to get the traps in there.

Much discussion on clearing for access.

Trails will be cleared using crosscut saws and assistance will be needed for that effort, in addition to crosscut saw training for new employees and volunteers.

Kim Waites Wild Alabama - Horse trails have numerous blow downs that need crosscut. I have those mapped of their obstructions.

Janice Barrett - Wild Alabama - If we have enough crosscutters, can we forgo the chainsaws? That was an incorrect statement by Allison, no chainsaws will be used.

Comments on chainsaw use in the wilderness. Mark encourages us to use partners and converse with partners. Chafed by the use of chainsaws due to the years of work with crosscuts – just to make it quick and easy.

We are not using chainsaws in the wilderness; it was not included in the MRDG.

Kim Waites Wild Alabama I know what's out there and I can say, we could get it done with crosscut saws in a few days. A lot of the obstructions are small diameter and don't even need big saws. Left over from the ice storm that affected mainly the ridge tops.

This will be very useful and is greatly appreciated.

Janice Barrett - Wild Alabama - And if we can clear wide enough for vehicles, why not use horse and wagons to get the traps in? Rollins was unable to respond from his phone, but later commented that when sounder locations are identified, the traps must be emplaced very quickly.

A meeting attendee, Nicole Kyle asked if the meeting being recorded so it could be sent to me as I missed part of the meeting?

No, the meeting is not recorded but anyone who is interested can be added to our mailing list by emailing Allison Cochran and the meeting summary is posted to our website.

Copies of the PowerPoint presentations presented are available by emailing Allison Cochran, jera.cochran@usda.gov