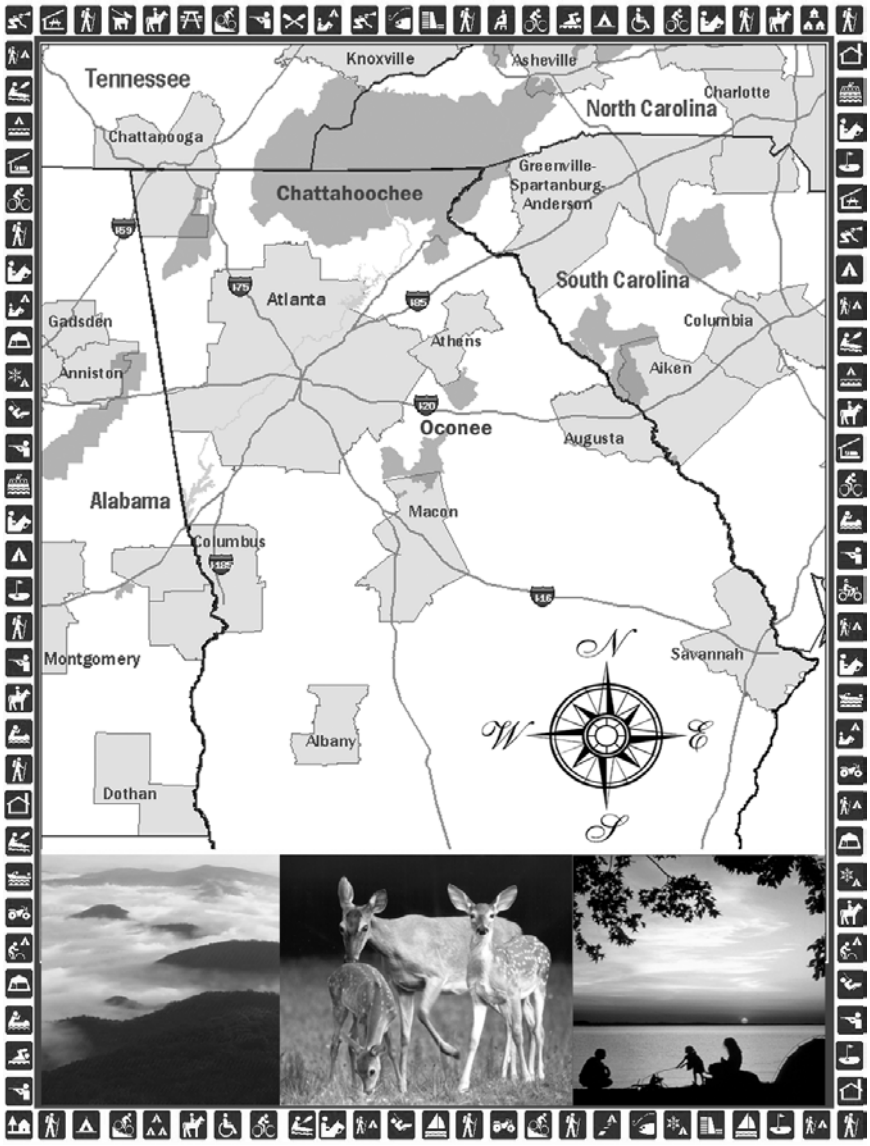
United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service
Southern Region

Record of Decision
for the
Final Environmental Impact Statement
of the
Land and Resource Management Plan Revision
for the
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests



Record of Decision for the Final Environmental Impact Statement of the Land and Resource Management Plan Revision for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

Chattahoochee National Forest – Banks, Catoosa, Chattooga, Dawson, Fannin, Floyd, Gilmer, Gordon, Habersham, Lumpkin, Murray, Rabun, Stephens, Towns, Union, Walker, White, and Whitfield Counties

Oconee National Forest – Greene, Jasper, Jones, Monroe, Morgan, Oconee, Oglethorpe, and Putnam Counties
State of Georgia, USA

Responsible Agency: USDA - Forest Service

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RECORD OF DECISION

I. INTRODUCTION

This document is a public Record of Decision (ROD) that documents my decision and rationale for approving the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and its implementing document the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (Revised Forest Plan) in Georgia. A Forest Plan is part of the long-range resource planning framework established by the Resource Planning Act (RPA). The RPA dealt with all forest lands in the Nation and a related law, the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA), dealt specifically with National Forest. NFMA requires the Forest Service to have forest plans that direct resource management activities for each forest within the National Forest System. These plans are to be revised when conditions have changed significantly, or on a ten to fifteen year cycle. The previous Land and Resource Management Plan was approved in 1985. The plan revision effort was launched in August 1996.

The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest is a single admininstrative unit, but contains two proclaimed National Forests. One of these is the Chattahoochee located primarily in the mountainous Blue Ridge of northern Georgia, but also including approximately 65,000 acres in the Ridge and Valley area of northwestern Georgia and about 46,000 acres in the upper Piedmont, generally south of Turnerville, Georgia. The second proclaimed forest is the Oconee, an area of approximately 115,000 acres in the Piedmont of east-central Georgia. The Oconee is administered as a ranger district rather than a as a separate national forest. My predecessor exercised her discretion under NFMA to decide that these Forests would be handled with a single plan and therefore a single environmental impact statement and a single Record of Decision.

The heritage and management of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests is based on a generally cooperative relationship among the many users of the forests, the scientific community, and the Forest Service. This Revised Forest Plan represents a significant step forward in the potential to build on these historic relationships while improving land stewardship. Revision of the Forest Plan is based on our increasing understanding of how best to restore, enhance and sustain the ecosystems of these national forests, while serving public demand for a broad range of uses and products.

The population of northern and middle Georgia and visitation to the area continue to grow rapidly, resulting in ever-increasing, and sometimes conflicting, demands on this natural heritage. Constrained budgets, fixed land capability, legal requirements, dynamic ecosystems and public expectations means we must rely on adaptive management in making land management decisions. Adaptive management is about learning and continually adjusting our course but all the while moving forward. Adaptive management is using our scientific knowledge and experience to design management strategies that allow us to progress toward our ecological and socioeconomic objectives as we learn. We will test our assumptions, monitor and make adjustments as we learn from our work and share information with the public on our findings.

II. MY DECISION

I have decided to select Alternative I from the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests). By selecting Alternative I, the Revised Forest Plan that implements it is also approved. The Plan describes in greater detail than the FEIS the goals, objectives, standards, management area direction, lands suitable for timber production and recommendations to Congress for additions to each of the national Wilderness and the national Wild and Scenic Rivers systems.

A. COMPONENTS OF THE DECISION

The FEIS and Forest Plan were developed according to the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and its implementing regulations *(36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219*); the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); and the Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (*40 CFR 1500 1508)*.

The Forest Plan provides direction to assure coordination of multiple-uses (outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, wildlife and fish, and wilderness) and sustained yield of products and services *(16 USC 1604(e)*). It fulfills legislative requirements and addresses local, regional, and national issues. The FEIS discloses the environmental consequences of the alternative management strategies and how they respond to the issues. I have studied and considered the FEIS in order to make the following decisions:

1. Management direction and associated long-range goals and objectives for the next 10-15 years in order to provide for multiple use and sustained yield of the products and services people use from the Forest, including outdoor recreation, range, timber, water, wildlife, fish, and wilderness. The Forest Plan establishes this direction in Chapter 2 *(36 CFR 219.11(b)).*

2. Management areas, which reflect biological, physical, watershed, and social differences; and management prescriptions, which reflect different desired conditions and provide the specific information used to develop projects to implement the Forest Plan. The Forest Plan establishes watershed management areas in Chapter 4. The management prescriptions are described in Chapter 3 and displayed on the Forest Plan Map *(36 CFR 219.11(c)).*

3. Standards, which set the sideboards for achieving the goals, objectives and desired conditions and provide meaningful direction when implementing projects. The Chattahoochee-Oconee Revised Forest Plan contains standards that apply across the entire Forest in Chapter 2 and those that apply to specific areas of the Forest in Chapters 3 and 4 *(36 CFR 219.13 to 219.27).*

4. Lands suitable for different types of uses, and on lands which are suitable for timber production, the maximum timber harvesting levels (or Allowable Sale Quantity) ensuring a sustained yield of wood products in perpetuity. The suitability of different lands for different uses on the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests is described by management prescriptions in Chapter 3 of the Land and Resource Management Plan. Lands suitable for timber production are displayed on a digital map in the CD-ROM that accompanies each Revised Forest Plan. The Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) is determined to be 9 mmcf (million cubic feet) per year for the first ten years (50 mmbf (million board feet)). *(36 CFR 219.14 and 36 CFR 219.16)*

5. Wilderness study areas recommended to Congress. We have recommended 11 areas be added to Wilderness Study. *(36 CFR 219.17)*

6. Monitoring and evaluation requirements needed to ensure that the direction is carried out, that management actions are effective at moving toward goals, and to determine how well outputs and effects were predicted. These requirements are contained in Chapter 5 of the Forest Plan. *(6 CFR 219.11(d))*

The Forest Plan, through the goals, objectives, and management prescriptions, identifies the desired resource conditions Forest Service managers will strive to meet. The standards generally define limitations for developing the projects needed to move from current conditions to the desired conditions. However, a unit's ability to close the gap between current and desired conditions is dependent on many factors and will likely fluctuate over the life of the plan. The Forest Supervisor will have discretion on the overall rate of plan implementation, depending upon the budgets that are available and Regional/Forest priorities. The attainment of plan objectives in some program areas and their associated outputs or desired conditions may take longer or their quantity may be reduced if the funding is not fully available for that program area. Another key component of implementing the Plan will be efforts to monitor the progress being made over time toward achieving the desired conditions. These monitoring results will also influence the Forest Supervisor's decisions in determining the plan implementation priorities.

B. Rationale for the Decision

1. Introduction

The Forest Plan represents a balance among the diversity of interests and uses of the National Forest within the capability of the land and waters, the biology of its component plants and animals, and the ecosystems that they form. It also considers likely future changes within the ten to fifteen year anticipated life of my decision and seeks to maintain flexibility to meet changed conditions. I have sought to not make decisions that severely limit the decision space of my successors to meet the issues of their times. Also important to me is maintaining the collaborative and cooperative nature of much of National Forest management and the partnerships we already have and others we hope to build in the future.

The Revised Forest Plan (Plan) balances social and environmental values. It recognizes the importance of all natural resources, as well as the desire for the continued availability of goods and services the public expects from the Forest. None of the alternatives considered would satisfy everyone completely. Alternative I strikes a balance among competing interests to achieve the maximum net public benefits from forest resources in an environmentally sensitive manner. The outputs and activities of the Plan are within the physical and biological capability of the land and Alternative I can be implemented without reducing that capability. I believe that the Plan meets the agency's obligations to the American people, as well as to Georgians generally and to the local residents living within the Forest boundaries.

2. Responding to the Issues

My reasoning for selecting Alternative I is discussed below for each planning issue. The first twelve were common to each of the five Southern Appalachian national forests in revision. The remaining four are local to the Chattahoochee and Oconee. Public comments relative to the issues below was considered in making this decision. Some of those comments are summarized with the issue discussions.

Issue 1: Terrestrial Plants and Animals and Their Associated Habitats

Alternative I addresses this issue by striving to:

- Maintain or increase habitats for those species needing large, contiguous forested landscapes where the management of National Forest lands can make a difference in their populations and viability.

Provide habitat conditions necessary to maintain viable populations of plants, fish, and wildlife native to the planning area, and to support desirable levels of selected species (e.g., species with special habitat needs, locally rare species, species commonly trapped/hunted, or species of special interest).

Public comments reflected a broad array of interests and concerns revolving around "biodiversity." Some people feel that biodiversity objectives need to be achieved through active multiple-use management, while others feel that biodiversity can only be achieved through passive management emphasizing "natural" processes. In either case, there is a public value for diverse native plant and animal communities, especially at the scale of their State or the combination of State and physiographic region.

For biological diversity, the overall goal is to maintain the native species and the ecosystems on which they depend. The Plan uses an approach that manages broad ecosystems as well as individual species for accomplishing these interests. Comprehensive planning for plant and animal diversity includes:

- Developing objectives and standards for maintenance and restoration of desired ecological conditions based on knowledge of overall ecosystem structure and function.
- Establishing levels of management activities important to restoration and maintenance of community diversity.
- Conducting biological evaluations and assessments at both the forest plan and site-specific project levels.
- Evaluating risk to species of viability concern at the forest plan level.
- Conserving populations of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species.
- Selection and monitoring of management indicator species.

Based on interdisciplinary analysis of the proposed plan and its alternatives, I believe that implementing Alternative I will provide a diversity of habitats in all age classes and the flexibility to create additional habitats that respond to the dynamics involved with managing complex ecosystems. The direction in Alternative I is geared towards maintenance, restoration and enhancement of the habitats for terrestrial species occurring on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

Issue 2: Threatened, Endangered, Sensitive, and Locally Rare Species

Most comments on the Plan supported recovery of federally-listed species and management of federally-listed, Regional Forester-identified sensitive, and locally-rare species where needed. In addressing this topic, Alternative I management activities:

- Contribute to the recovery of federally-listed proposed, endangered or threatened (PET) species and ensure Forest Service activities do not jeopardize the continued existence of such species or of habitat designated by the Secretary of the Interior as critical.
- Conserve Regional Forester identified sensitive species (S) to maintain their viability on the Forest and ensure they do not move toward listing under the Endangered Species Act.
- Conserve locally rare species; species rare in the state, but usually secure at the scale of their entire distributional ranges.

Proposed, endangered or threatened and sensitive (PETS) and locally rare species lists are developed in consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Georgia Natural Heritage Program of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, university researchers and others knowledgeable of the various species. Coordination with these federal and state agencies and individuals will continue in the implementation of the plan.

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) mandates Federal The Endangered agencies to ensure any actions "authorized, funded, or carried out by such agency is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any endangered species or threatened species" or result in the destruction of critical habitat. The two national forests of Georgia provide either potential or occupied habitat for five aquatic species and twelve terrestrial species federally listed as threatened or endangered under the provisions of ESA and two terrestrial species that are candidates for listing. Federally-listed species are addressed in Alternative I by forestwide objectives and standards written for protection and management specifically for these species, and written in cooperation with US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Where they occur in rare habitats, PETS and locally-rare species are protected and managed partly through the plan prescriptions. The riparian corridor prescription (MRX 11) also provides objectives and standards that contribute to rare riparian-associated species protection and restoration. In addition to these prescription objectives and standards, I have decided to include forestwide standards and objectives that will strengthen and define management for rare species throughout the Chattahoochee-Oconee across all prescriptions.

To further contribute to the conservation and management needs of these rare species and habitats, the Plan includes monitoring requirements that address monitoring of the revised Plan as it relates to PETS and locally rare species. These questions will provide for coordination across Forest boundaries. Finally, plan standards require the protection of aquatic habitats and species, rare habitats and species; as well as assessment of impacts to these species, at the project level.

Issue 3: Old Growth

Alternative I creates and maintains a network of large and medium old growth patches in the Blue Ridge Mountains and Southern Ridge and Valley ecological sections and medium patches in the Southern Appalachian Piedmont section. These patches have representation of each old growth community ecologically appropriate to that section (through restoration, protection, or maintenance activities) to meet biological and social needs. The Revised Plan includes specific direction for the identification, designation, and protection of additional small patches for old growth. These patches could include stands of existing, possible, and future old growth.

Alternative I is a well-balanced approach to implementing the requirements of regional old growth guidance issued in 1997 (Guidance for Conserving and Restoring Old-Growth Forest Communities on National Forests in the Southern Region – Forestry Report R8-FR 62). The Plan direction provides for the development of old growth conditions. On the Chattahoochee, 23 percent of the Forest is in either old growth prescriptions or prescriptions that will result in the development and retention of old growth. On the Oconee, 7 percent is in these types of allocations. Each old growth community type appropriate to each ecological section is adequately represented in large or medium blocks. I find that the Chattahoochee-Oconee Plan goes beyond the requirements of regional old growth guidance by providing old growth representation in the Piedmont portion of the Chattooga Ranger District, below ecological section scale.

Data from outside the Forest Service has been considered and appropriately used in developing an old growth network. Plan direction includes the requirement to either maintain existing old growth or to give first priority to dual accomplishment of old growth and wildlife habitat objectives on the same area. Plan direction to projects on the identification and allocation of small blocks appropriately distributes additional representation spatially in a way that enhances the overall network by using watersheds as the pattern. Plan direction is also focused on improving representation of old growth community types with the least area on the national forest. Alternative I allocates communities at or

beyond minimum old growth age in the next twenty years into management prescriptions unsuitable for timber harvest. This means that plan allocations were made to ensure the earliest and best provision for old growth.

Issue 4: Riparian Area Management, Water Quality and Aquatic Habitats

One of my concerns as Regional Forester is to ensure that resources on the National Forests under our stewardship are sustainable into the future. Clean water for drinking and various other uses is one of the most important resources the National Forest provides. Every alternative considered includes standards and best management practices to ensure recreation, timber, minerals, grazing, and other uses are managed to protect the quality of the water flowing from the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

Each alternative contains provisions to protect the riparian areas along our streams, lakes, rivers, and wetlands. New, state of the art standards are employed to protect not only streams that flow all year, but also those that flow only in the spring, and those that flow only after storm events, called ephemeral stream channels. The riparian corridor prescription is designed to not only maintain water quality and protect aquatic species, but to also maintain the actual riparian area and the terrestrial species who use this area.

All alternatives set aside source (or municipal) watersheds for special management to protect drinking water. These same alternatives identify watersheds in need of restoration and use reference watershed conditions to help us identify when a watershed needs restoration. Between the Draft and Final EIS, the Forest worked closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop management direction for aquatic species, which has been incorporated into Alternative I.

Very little difference between alternatives is evident in Chapter 3 of the FEIS related to watershed or aquatic species. This is appropriate for a resource as fundamental as water.

Issue 5: Wood Products

Alternative I strives to:

- Determine where forest management activities are needed and appropriate to achieve the desired composition, structure, and function of forest ecosystems. Such activities will also provide a sustainable supply of wood products.
- Provide supplies of wood products when the Forest Service is in a unique position to contribute to meeting the demand for those products.
- Use timber harvest as a cost-effective tool manage forested ecosystems.

Comments received from the public ranged from those opposed to all forms of timber harvest on public lands at all times and for all purposes, to others who saw the purpose of national forests as primarily a raw material source for local or regional wood processing facilities, or for their contribution to the local economies. In between were those who thought there should be a community-based balance between wood production and recreation benefits. Some said that the values they were most concerned with, such as wildlife game species, can be best provided for through habitat manipulation that includes the production of wood products. In the end I chose Alternative I because it provides for management of the national forests for multiple uses, including wood products.

The designation of suitable timber land (36 CFR 219.14) is found in Chapter 3 of the Plan by individual management prescription. The total suitable land base is shown in Appendix F of the Revised Forest Plan. Land suitable for timber production is determined by both ecological capability and the appropriateness of growing trees on a regulated basis for industrial or consumer use considering human values for specific areas. On the Chattahoochee NF, there are 589,313 acres

tentatively suitable for timber production and 107,326 acres on the Oconee. This was the decision space I had available to me after subtracting those lands which are not forest or had already been withdrawn and could not be re-considered in the plan revsion.

The allowable sale quantity (ASQ) of timber (36 CFR 219.16) is established in a Forest Plan. The ASQ varied by alternative. A timber harvest scheduling model (SPECTRUM) was used to estimate the ASQ by projecting harvest, growth, and timber inventory for 200 years into the future. The documentation of this process is found in Appendix B of the FEIS. For the first 10-year period, Alternative A projects an ASQ of 80 MMCF (million cubic feet), Alternative B projects 150 MMCF, Alternative D projects 200 MMCF, Alternative E projects 40 MMCF, Alternative F projects 230 MMCF, Alternative G projects 10 MMCF, and Alternative I projects 90 MMCF.

In 1985, the ASQ was set at 158 MMCF in a settlement agreement on an appeal of the first-generation Forest plan. The average annual volume sold in the period 1985 through 1996, inclusive, was 8.1 MMCF, or 81 MMCF for a decade. I believe the Revised Forest Plan ASQ of 90 MMCF is a reasonable estimate of output that will result if all the plan objectives are met. Based on the analysis in the FEIS I conclude that this estimate is more likely to be a liberal one than an under-estimate. I find that the estimated increase of ten percent above actual historic harvest is not a significant conflict with other issues and is not a shift in management toward timber production. Rather this difference derives from better estimates, more powerful modeling tools, and a history of production under the 1985 plan far below modeled capability of the land. I find that the estimated harvest amounts of Alternative I are sustainable based on the analysis disclosed in the FEIS and can contribute toward the economic stability and growth of local communities while being the most cost-effective means of achieving ecological restoration goals.

Issue 6: Aesthetics and Scenery Management

Alternative I strives to:

- Protect and enhance the scenic and aesthetic values of the lands in the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests.
- Manage the National Forests to provide a variety of Landscape Character Themes with the predominant themes being Natural Appearing, Natural Evolving, and variations of these themes.

The natural-appearing landscapes of high-quality scenery are one of the main reasons people travel and recreate in the North Georgia mountains and, to a lesser degree, in the Georgia Piedmont. Scenic landscapes help to determine the success of recreation and tourism. Opinions expressed varied as to the existing scenic condition. Some see the need for enhancement, restoration, and for increased opportunities to provide older and larger trees. Some think that a predominantly natural-appearing, non-industrial-looking forest landscape character should be emphasized; and that certain areas of the national forests - such as travel and trail corridors, important view sheds, and other places with recreation use - should provide a higher level of scenery. Some people also commented that management for hardwoods should be increased because hardwoods tend to enhance the scenic quality of an area.

I have decided to select Alternative I in part because inventoried scenic class one and two lands, those with the highest levels of concern for scenic quality, are consistently allocated to management prescriptions that either emphasize the scenery resource or are compatible with its maintenance. In particular, Alternative I allocates the viewsheds of each of the nationally-designated Scenic Byways on the Chattahoochee to their own prescription (MRx 7.A), containing approximately 12,000 acres or two percent of the Forest. Management prescriptions with a primary emphasis on scenic resources (MRx 7.A and 7.B) total approximately 29,000 acres or four percent of the Forest. I also find that the Appalachian Trail, other nationally-recognized long distance trails, and the foreground of major forest roads have management direction that focuses on maintaining or enhancing scenic quality. There is

a thorough framework in plan direction to ensure that visual quality concerns are consistently and appropriately integrated into project decisions in all management prescriptions.

Issue 7: Recreation Opportunities and Experience

Alternative I will:

- Provide recreation opportunities that are unique and of exceptional long-term value, and which are not widely available on non-Federal lands.
- Meet the following recreation needs within the capabilities of the land:
- Hiking, biking, and equestrian trail systems, especially in non-motorized settings with high quality landscapes. (Provide separate-use trails where necessary to reduce user conflicts or to improve the quality of recreation experiences.)
- Designated off-highway vehicle (OHV) routes (which will occur primarily in Roaded Natural 1 settings).
- Establishment of OHV screening criteria for any proposal of new OHV systems (Appendix I).
- Hunting, fishing, and non-consumptive wildlife opportunities.
- Improved interpretive opportunities or other special recreation needs locally identified.
- Provide for the "backcountry" (semi-primitive and remote) recreation experiences that are not available on other land ownerships.
- Focus on maximizing visitor satisfaction within financial and environmental limitations of the national forests. Although the opportunities for outdoor recreation are extensive, and the public demand for these opportunities is seemingly endless, the Forest's capability to meet these demands is neither static nor endless. Visitor preferences have shifted over time, and both changing financial limitations and environmental impacts had to be considered.

The Chattahoochee-Oconee is a designated urban national forest, the only one in the Southern region of the Forest Service. The metropolitan areas of Chattanooga, TN; Rome, Atlanta, Athens, and Macon, GA; and the Tri-Cities area of up-state South Carolina appear to be trending toward coalescing in a ring of human population, development and use pressures surrounding the Forests. Both the Chattahoochee and the Oconee are readily accessible from any of these metro areas for weekend recreation. New arrivals to the area often prefer to locate near or adjacent to the National Forests for scenic and recreational amenities.

I chose Alternative I because it provides a range of recreation development from nearly none in Wilderness to highly developed in unique areas with interpretive services, yet it avoids competition with private sector activities. Alternative I recommends expansion of Wilderness acres in Georgia and retains the possibility of further expansion in the future for the primitive end of the recreation spectrum. It also recommends further study for the potential expansion of the Wild and Scenic River System in Georgia with wild, scenic, and recreational river sections. This provides for a broad range of water-based recreation activities as well as a range of development, from little on wild sections to moderate on recreational sections. Alternative I also moderately constrains future recreation development to avoid foreseeable environmental problems. In particular, the Plan requires all OHV, horse, and bike use to be on designated routes. For horse and bike use, this is a significant shift from past management. However, I have concluded that without this change we cannot continue to provide the high quality of recreation that is our stated goal, while at the same time being good stewards of the environment. Implementing this change will require cooperation and collaboration between the Forest Service and user groups, and also among user groups. With our finite land base and mounting use pressures, I believe this is the most appropriate way to balance environmental concerns, public issues, and legal requirements

Issue 8: Roadless Areas and Wilderness Management

Alternative I:

- Manages wilderness, roadless, and other unroaded areas to provide their full range of social and ecological benefits.
- Assures that the roadless character of inventoried roadless areas is maintained so as to continue to meet Forest Service roadless area criteria, regardless of their allocation.
- Continues to protect and manage existing wilderness areas.

The sufficiency of the approximately 117,000 acres in ten existing wilderness areas on the Chattahoochee continues to be debated. I am aware of the wide spectrum of feelings and values for more, less, or the same amount of Wilderness expressed by various communities of interests centering on public lands. Alternatives to the selected Forest Plan were considered in the FEIS that, among them, recommended all, none, or various combinations of the approximately 65,000 acres in twenty-three inventoried roadless areas to Congress for study of their appropriateness for wilderness designation.

Some people indicated to me that all Southern Appalachian Assessment (SAA) roadless areas should be recommended for wilderness designation. Others said there is enough wilderness and roadless areas should be managed to achieve other resource objectives. Some people said that all the areas identified in the Wilderness Society's Georgia Mountain Treasures publication (which is inclusive of, but not limited to, the inventoried roadless areas) should be recommended for either wilderness or some special area designation.

In selecting Alternative I, I recommend eleven inventoried roadless areas be further studied by Congress for inclusion into the national wilderness preservation system. Those areas are identified by name as: Ben Gap, Cedar Mountain, Duck Branch, Helton Creek, Shoal Branch, Tripp Branch, and Wilson Cove on the Brasstown Ranger District; Ellicott Rock Addition (less the designated Wild and Scenic River corridor), and Tate Branch (less acreage along private land at the Tate City Community) on the Tallulah Ranger District; Foster Branch, and Ken Mountain on the Cohutta Ranger District. As recommended, wilderness acreage on the Chattahochee increases by 8,090 acres to 125,520 acres. These areas are allocated into the 1.B management prescription.

Also, in selecting Alternative I, I have decided that twelve inventoried roadless areas on the Chattahoochee NF be allocated into other management prescriptions, but their roadless characteristics will continue to be maintained. This is done to continue to meet Forest Service roadless area management criteria. These twelve roadless areas either have limited wilderness character because of existing roads and/or other mechanized trail systems or evidence of previous management activities, or they contain areas needed for high elevation forest and habitat restorations that include early successional forest habitats. Also, these twelve roadless areas are all located within the Blue Ridge Mountains ecological section (M221D) that nests within the Central Appalachian Broadleaf Forest-Coniferous Forest-Meadow ecological Province (M221). This mountainous landform in Georgia is already well represented by the ten existing wilderness areas in the Chattahoochee NF, all of which are within it Based on the Bailey-Kuchler classification system of potential natural vegetation, all twelve of these roadless areas are also classed as Appalachian Oak Forest within the Eastern Deciduous Forest Province, which is also the same as that represented by the ten existing wilderness areas within the Chattahoochee NF.

The twelve roadless areas not recommended for further study for wilderness designations are identified by name as: Big Mountain, Joe Gap, Patterson Gap, and Sarah's Creek, all on the Tallulah Ranger District; Boggs Creek, Turner Creek, and Kelly Ridge (some acres are on the Tallulah R.D.) on the Chattooga Ranger District; Lance Creek (mostly within the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area), Indian Grave Gap, and Rocky Mountain on the Toccoa Ranger District; Pink Knob (contains the Mountaintown area) on the Armuchee-Cohutta Ranger District; and Miller Creek on the Brasstown Ranger District. In total, 58,780 acres are allocated into various non-wilderness management prescriptions.

Issue 9: Forest Health

Alternative I in the Revised Forest Plan places primary emphasis on the following two facets of forest health management :

- Management of National Forest ecosystems, either through restoration or maintenance, to provide the desired composition (species mix), structure (age class distribution), function (resulting benefits), and productivity over time.
- Reduction of the impacts from native or nonnative invasive species.

Many aspects of this issue are addressed under issues 1, 2, 3, 4, and 10. Chapter 2 of the EIS summarizes how the alternatives respond to this issue in terms of insect and disease concerns, prescribed fire, and restoration.

I have chosen Alternative I for the following reasons:

- It permits use of prescribed fire to the maximum extent I believe feasible for the Forest. The revised LRMP contains goals, standards and desired conditions that will promote prescribed fire as an ecosystem process, reduce the risk of wildfire, and at the same time protect soil, air and property.
- It includes restoration emphasis on a significant portion of the Forest's lands.
- It commits the Forest to deal with invasive plants.
- It addresses insect and disease concerns moderately well, while at the same time responding to the other significant issues.
- It addresses stand density concerns both in desired conditions, and in a forestwide objective.

I have a variety of concerns about forest health. I have concluded that Alternative I is a well balanced approach to forest health for the next ten to twenty years. I find that forested areas most at risk from potential damaging situations are predominantly allocated to prescriptions that will allow management to prevent problems or to respond with suppression actions should problems occur. In particular, I find that it is the best among alternatives for southern pine beetle on the Oconee and nearly the best for managing littleleaf disease.

My decision also includes a plan objective to thin approximately 10,000 acres of pine and oak communities on the Chattahoochee and approximately 35,000 acres on the Oconee over the next ten years. I believe this is an appropriate level to increase resistance of pine to recurrent southern pine beetle attacks, to maintain or improve wildlife habitat, accelerate the development of red-cockaded woodpecker foraging habitat, and to begin conditioning some stands for conversion to woodland conditions.

I believe this management strategy best fulfills the national forests' role in ecosystem management, maintaining and restoring ecosystem health, and providing for biodiversity while contributing raw wood material to the local manufacturing economic sector.

Issue 10: Special Areas and Rare Communities

Alternative I addresses this issue by:

- Protecting or restoring the rare communities found on National Forest lands
- Managing those areas with special geological, paleontological, botanical, zoological, cultural, or heritage characteristics to protect those characteristics (and where feasible, restore them)

The Chattahoochee-Oconee identified three categories of special areas: (1) pre-existing Regional Forester designations, (2) communities rare at regional scale, and (3) communities rare within National Forest in Georgia, including Botanic Areas identified in the 1985 Plan. Regarding the first category, the 1985 plan identified several areas previous Regional Foresters had designated prior to the National Forest Management Act. In those days, these areas, once designated, would have

remained in that designation indefinitely. Under NFMA, each plan revision must reconsider the status of such lands. Examples include Scenic Areas, Cultural and Heritage Areas, and Botanic Areas.

I had numerous concerns expressed to me about managing rare communities, such as those identified in the Southern Appalachian Assessment. In the view of some people, historic communities have become very limited in distribution and representation due to past land uses, and remain limited due to current management. Some people expressed concern that timber harvesting and recreational uses will further deteriorate the remnants of these communities, if they are not protected. Others stated that the biggest threats to these communities are from insects and diseases. Yet others expressed that existing land allocations and operational procedures adequately protect most of these areas and there is no justification for establishing additional areas for special protection. Some people have said existing special areas are not adequately protected from activities in the surrounding areas, indicating the possible need for larger areas to be protected.

I have decided that special areas designated by my predecessors will continue to receive equal or greater protection. I chose Alternative I in part because it does that. Some of these areas have also been enlarged from their original size, particularly with the addition of lands acquired since about 1990. Management direction has also been more sharply focused into the unique characteristics and opportunities of each area as well as their protection from human over-use or invasive species.

Management prescriptions 9.F, Rare Communities, and 4.D, Botanical and Zoological Areas, have been used to identify and protect existing rare botanic communities and to protect areas with a high likelihood of including regionally rare communities. These two prescriptions cover approximately 3,000 acres or four-tenths of one percent of the Chattahoochee, and approximately 725 acres or six-tenths of one percent of the Oconee. Also, I have decided to require that, as additional locations of regionally-rare communities are identified, they will be allocated to management prescription 9.F.

Issue 11: Wild and Scenic Rivers

Alternative I:

- Protects the outstandingly remarkable values of the Wild, Scenic, and Recreation Rivers that are either already designated by Congress; recommended for further study leading to possible designation; or suitable for designation.
- Protects the outstandingly remarkable values of the streams that were eligible, but not suitable for further study.
- Protects the outstandingly remarkable values of the streams that were suitable, but not recommended for further study.
- Meets the regulation (36 CFR 219.17) that gives criteria for rivers recommended for wild and scenic allocation.

The Chattooga River is currently the only stream on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests designated by Congress as a unit of the National Wild and Scenic River system.

Based on analysis in the FEIS and its Appendix D (eligibility and suitability findings) it is my decision to recommend 11.1 miles of the Ocmulgee River and 9.7 miles of the Little River in the Southern Appalachian Piedmont ecological section, both on the Oconee NF, for further study leading to possible inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Until a final decision is made by Congress, I am protecting those qualities that made these rivers suitable by allocating these river segments into Management Prescription 2.B – Recommended Wild and Scenic Rivers, in the Revised Forest Plan.

It is also my decision to recommend 13 miles of the Conasauga River (in conjunction with 5 additional miles being recommended on the Cherokee NF), 14 miles of the Jacks River; 8 miles of the Chattahoochee River; and 3 miles of Overflow Creek, all in the Blue Ridge Mountains ecological section, for further study leading to possible inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The recommendation of Overflow Creek would, if acted on, extend the designated Chattooga Wild and Scenic River corridor on the West Fork of the Chattooga River to the North Carolina State line. These rivers are all on the Chattahoochee NF. Until a final decision is made by Congress, I am protecting those qualities that made these rivers suitable by allocating these river segments into Management Prescription 2.B – Recommended Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Most of those streams that are eligible, but not suitable, and those streams that are suitable, but not recommended for further study, will have their outstandingly remarkable values protected by allocation into Management Prescription 4.H - Chattahoochee-Oconee Outstandingly Remarkable Streams. In one case, public comment favored a botanic area more than the recreation-focused 4.H allocation because of concerns about overuse, and the change was made. Management direction for the Botanic Area prescription continues to protect the stream for future reconsideration for wild and scenic river designation.

Issue 12: Access and Road Management (Travel Management)

Alternative I addresses this topic with management prescriptions and activities that would:

- Provide a transportation system that supplies and improves access for all Forest road users within the capabilities of the land.
- Accelerate the pace of decommissioning unneeded roads (classified and unclassified).
- Provide better quality access by upgrading highly used Forest roads, and any roads that are needed, but which are adversely effecting surrounding resource values and conditions.

This is one of the more controversial issues and also one of the most difficult to address. Forest access policy relates to allowable travel by pedestrians, horses, and motorized and nonmotorized vehicles. As an urban forest, both the Chattahoochee and the Oconee receive considerable passenger vehicle, OHV, horse, bike and hiking use. System roads and trails are the primary means of national forest access, however, they are also a source of many concerns. These concerns predominantly center on the environmental effects of roads, which will also be addressed in the discussions of other issues such as riparian corridors, threatened and endangered species, and watersheds.

Some people told me they would like to see motorized access to the national forests increased, especially during hunting seasons, for recreational uses, or to meet forest management needs. Other people, however, feel that road construction should be limited and some existing roads decommissioned. One school of thought would like to see extensive reductions in the Forest Service road system. Other comments were made that new roads should not be constructed for the purposes of logging, resource management, or for OHV use. Some people tell us we aren't maintaining the existing road system well enough, and ask why would we ever consider more. Some people want wider roads with better surfacing and alignment suitable for large horse trailers or motorcoaches. In comments on the draft, it was clear that some users felt they were being unfairly singled out to have their use or access constrained. Others were very concerned that they would be restricted to only the present trail system or to undesirable locations.

The difficulty with any large scale planning effort is to blend the competing demands and create a result which best protects the land and recognizes the human dimension and influence on the land form. I have concluded that Alternative I does the best job of blending the demands for roaded access and the requirement to protect the environmental and scenic values of the forest.

Alternative I provides for retaining the roadless character as measured by Forest Service roadless criteria for all inventoried roadless areas. It provides for focused soil and water restoration efforts that will maintain or improve access while responding in a prioritized way to problem situations. Additionally, it recognizes the probable future need and current opportunity to improve visitor safety and amenities at sites with high visitation. I have also decided that, like OHV use, horse and bicycle use will be restricted to designated routes. It is only in this way that we can meet our recreation goal

of providing high quality, nature-based recreation while protecting resources. It is not our intention to limit use to the present trail system.

Issue 13: Chattooga River Watershed

My decision for the management of this watershed involves the need for coordination between the Sumter, the Nantahala and the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. I am selecting Alternative I because it provides needed direction to protect the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River, while also addressing the needs of the multi-state watershed to provide multiple uses and ecological restoration where needed.

Congress designated 57 miles of the Chattooga River, located in Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina as a component of the National Wild and Scenic River System in 1974. The headwaters of the River begin in North Carolina and form the boundary between Georgia and South Carolina downriver. The river corridor and its immediate surroundings offer many recreational uses. Recreational boating (kayaking, canoeing, and rafting) has been a popular use of the river for many years, and includes both guided and self-guided users.

The uses of the river are regulated by the Wild and Scenic River Act, and respond to seasonal changes, water level and type of use (commercial and private). Boating uses are currently allowed downstream of the Highway 28 bridge to Tugalo Lake. Alternative I will continue to permit this use designation. The Sumter National Forest is designated as the lead administrative entity for management of the Wild and Scenic River.

The Chattooga River watershed also provides a wide range of multiple uses on National Forest lands. Alternative I will implement several management options for the lands and resources of the watershed including old growth, wildlife habitat needs, backcountry, restoring vegetation associations, and providing high quality water for recreation and fisheries. A recent effort to address the restoration of watershed conditions in the Chatooga River basin has involved a cooperative effort of agencies and landowners to address problems on a large-scale watershed basis.

Issue 14: Red-cockaded Woodpecker Habitat Management

Alternative I answers these questions regarding red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW): management:

- What portions of the Oconee National Forest are designated as a habitat management area (HMA) for the red-cockaded woodpecker?
- Should a Forest Plan goal be to acquire lands in order for the Oconee to host a Secondary Core Population for the red-cockaded woodpecker?

The RCW is federally listed as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. The Forest Service is legally required to protect the species and its habitat. I have made sure that Alternative I implements the Recovery Plan for the RCW as well as relevant direction from the 1995 ROD and EIS for RCW Management in the Southern Region. I have also made sure the decision permits flexibility in implementation. At issue is how we use this flexibility, because of certain public desires that conflict with the biology of the RCW.

The red-cockaded woodpecker occurs in the Southern Appalachian Piedmont ecological section of central Georgia. On the Oconee National Forest (ONF) the area designated as a habitat management area is south of Interstate 20 and includes land in Jasper, Jones, Putnam and Baldwin counties, particularly in and near the Hitchiti Experimental Forest. More specifically, Oconee National Forest habitat consists of 51,746 acres of predominantly loblolly and shortleaf pines in the overstory, with a dense mid-story of regenerating sweetgum, pine and oak species. A majority of the area consists of 'old field' pine located on lands that were historically used as agricultural fields. In the Plan, this portion of the ONF is allocated to Management Prescriptions 3.B (Hitchiti Experimental Forest), 8.D (RCW HMA) and 8.D.1 (RCW sub-HMA). The proposed management direction for the

51,746 acres was consistent across all alternatives, so the decisions I made for the Oconee were how best to integrate the response to other issues with the recovery of the RCW.

Most of the loblolly pine forest types on the southern end of the Oconee NF are within the RCW Habitat Management Area (HMA). The strategy we will follow to protect red-cockaded woodpeckers and their habitat on the Oconee NF is to provide old pine trees that are suitable for nesting cavities, mature pine forests with a midstory suitable for foraging, and enough of each to maintain a healthy population. Any less restrictive deviations from these standards requires concurrence from the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service. The monitoring direction in the Forest plan will ensure that adaptive management is applied as needed.

In 2002 the Oconee National Forest had 20 active aggregations of cavity trees ("clusters") providing habitat for RCW. The Revised Forest Plan has a short-term objective of 25 active clusters and a long-term population objective of 176 active clusters. In conjunction with the adjacent Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge the long-term objective is 250 active clusters. These population objectives are based on a detailed look at the distribution of the current active clusters and the pine and pine/hardwood forest type acres that can be reasonably managed as RCW habitat in the future. The Revised Plan also places a priority on the acquisition of lands needed for conservation of threatened and endangered species.

The RCW population objectives are based on the allocation of HMAs. The northern portion (north of Interstate 20) of the Oconee NF is not within an RCW HMA. In this area there have not been any active clusters and the habitat is highly fragmented by unsuitable habitat and private property, which makes management, especially prescribed burning, prohibitive.

Issue 15: Recreational Gold Collecting

I have selected the management direction of Alternative I to:

- Provide opportunities for the recreation visitor to prospect and retrieve placer gold from streams on National Forest lands, and
- Protect aquatic and riparian habitats, and water quality in stream areas where recreational gold collection is allowed.

Searching for gold continues to be a challenging recreation pastime for some recreation visitors. Gold panning is the most common method used to prospect and extract placer gold on streams within the 'gold belt' of the Chattahoochee National Forest. The 'gold belt' is a relatively narrow geologic feature that corresponds to the 'Hightower Ridges' landform in Georgia. Gold panning is the simplest method of prospecting used in separating metallic gold from more or less disintegrated rock or sand. Impacts to streams are short-term, mainly some displacement of bottom gravels and materials. Those impacts are roughly comparable to someone walking through or in a stream.

Other methods of extraction, such as sluice boxes and suction dredges, are not currently allowed on the Chattahoochee NF (on private land within the gold belt of Georgia, these methods are permitted). Permitting of suction dredging would require watershed assessments and determination of effects on any threatened or endangered species. As the planning process developed, public opposition to allowing suction dredging became more pronounced. This opposition came from a wide variety of sources including trout fishermen, wildlife professionals, and citizens concerned with water quality.

I have made the decision to select Alternative I, which continues recreational prospecting and extraction of gold by panning only within the Chattahoochee-Oconee NF.

Issue 16: Special Uses

Alternative I would:

- Allow special uses where legally possible, not allow them in certain allocations, and discourage them in other allocations.

Special uses are formal authorizations granted to an individual, organization, or another government agency to use National Forest land or resources under written stipulations. In 2002, there were approximately 800 special uses, including communication sites, the US Army Ranger training facility at Camp Merrill, outfitters and guides, private driveways, public road easements and right-of-ways, and utility corridors. Due to increasing population growth around the Forests, the demand for special uses has risen in the last ten years across both Forests. Other special uses have remained at relatively stable levels. Special use applications can be expected to continue as residential construction and related infrastructure development increases.

Most of the public comments I reviewed on special uses related to communication sites and utility corridors. Some of the comments received asked for no additional designated communication sites. They asked that use be expanded at existing sites where possible, with no more permits to be issued when those sites are filled. Other comments stated that suitable sites on private land were not available, since the National Forest encompassed almost all of the highest ground, and the Forest should open new sites as necessary to address local needs. Some people wanted special restrictions on towers in the plan to protect visual quality and migratory birds.

Alternative I provides for new communication sites or utility corridors in accordance with land management planning policy and special use policy on a case-by-case basis in some management prescription allocations. In other allocations, communication sites or utility corridor authorizations are not compatible with other multiple-use goals and objectives and will not be considered. The Plan includes a requirement to locate new utility corridor special uses as an additional use inside existing corridors where possible. As a secondary choice, the Plan directs the widening of existing corridors rather than the creation of new ones. I believe this is the most appropriate middle ground to meet all of our obligations and responsibilities.

3. ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE ALTERNATIVE

The Council on Environmental Quality has defined the "environmentally preferable" alternative as:

> *. . . the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA's section 101. Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources.*

Alternative G is the environmentally preferable alternative because it has fewer direct adverse effects on the environment overall. Alternative G would schedule the least amount of timber harvest, associated road development, and create the least negative human-induced change to the natural environment including the least effects to soil productivity and the lowest increases in sediment yield. Alternative G would have the most acres allocated to existing and future old growth. It would also have the least amount of beneficial human-induced effects.

Even though Alternative G is preferable, from the standpoint of the physical and biological environment, I believe Alternative I provides for a better balance between the social, economic, physical, and biological environment. It provides the best balance between negative environmental effects and positive effects from human management of natural resources.

Many components of Alternative G are incorporated in Alternative I, such as full protection of rare communities; streamside and riparian areas; threatened, endangered, sensitive, and locally- rare species habitat and watersheds; designated old-growth areas; watershed restoration areas; and management, maintenance, and restoration of forest communities. Although Alternative I would emphasize wildlife that are area-sensitive and prefer late-successional habitat, it also would provide

more flexibility than Alternative G to manage habitats for a variety of wildlife species that need early-successional habitat. Also, Alternative I would provide opportunities to improve overall forest health by effectively restoring native plant communities and lessening potential losses to insects and disease.

4. ALTERNATIVES WITH HIGHER PRESENT NET VALUE

All alternatives were analyzed for the 'present net value;' that is, the cumulative revenues and cumulative costs across fifty years discounted to the year 2000. All alternatives except current management (Alternative F) had a higher present net value than Alternative I, which neither maximizes revenues nor minimizes costs.

I selected Alternative I because it best addresses ecological restoration needs, and provides better overall ecological and social benefits than any other alternative. Although Alternative I does not generate as many market valued commodities relative to costs as some of the other alternatives, this alternative recognizes the importance of ecological processes, has a high emphasis on restoring native ecosystems, and provides a high level of recreational opportunities. The timber program of Alternative I has the greatest positive contribution to overall present net value of any alternative. Alternative I better addresses public concerns about recreation, wildlife, and forest management strategies.

In summary, Alternative I does not cause the least disturbance of the environment, nor does it have the highest present net worth of the alternatives considered. However, I believe Alternative I achieves a balance between the economic and environmental issues and concerns voiced by the public, within the physical and biological capability of the land. Most important, I am confident that this alternative can be implemented without reducing that capability. Of the alternatives, I conclude that Alternative I is the one that maximizes net public benefits.

C. CHANGES BETWEEN DRAFT AND FINAL

The revised red-cockaded woodpecker Recovery Plan was issued by the USFWS concurrently with the release of the Draft EIS and Plan. Subsequent consultation with the USFWS resulted in refining and strengthening management direction for the RCW and integrating into the Plan the guidance of the recovery plan.

Between draft and final the Chattahoochee-Oconee IDT replaced the designated Wild and Scenic River prescription (MRX 2.A series) with the one from the Sumter NF for the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River. Originally, the Chattahoochee-Oconee NF 2.A prescriptions had been written to prospectively include streams recommended for Wild and Scenic River designation (M Rx 2.B series). Public comments took rather strong exception to this approach as running counter to the identification of the Chattooga River as a separate issue. Several people asked for the identical prescription for the Chattooga River. This was done for the final, recognizing that the 2.A prescription series will not fit additional Wild and Scenic designations.

Another source of change was a refined effort to ensure that rare communities (MRX 9.F) and botanic/zoologic areas (MRX 4.D) were allocated. The commitment to improve in this regard was made in the draft and these changes were a follow-through.

The riparian corridor prescription was intensively edited between draft and final. Field tests of application showed that as written at the draft it would compromise the accomplishment of wildlife habitat objectives, including T&E habitat. Consultation with the USFWS and coordination with the Georgia Forestry Commission and the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division also demonstrated the need and the opportunity to refine and clarify direction. One specific and significant improvement was to recognize the difference between major and minor actions, using NEPA criteria for this distinction. Another refinement was that the width distances of the riparian corridor management prescription proposed in the Draft Forest Plan were revised to: (1) provide fixed widths that fit terrain

and stream characteristics by ecological section, and (2) provide direction that complies with the streamside management zone distances identified in Georgia's Best Management Practices for Forestry. Making these coincident responds well to the Georgia Forestry Commission's role in non-point source pollution compliance under the State Implementation Plan for the Clean Water Act. It also ensures that State programs are seamless with National Forest direction. Riparian direction was also strengthened by ensuring that only potentially harmful activities were constrained and beneficial ones were not.

Substantial GIS analysis was done to validate more fully and to refine objective quantities. These were modeled for locations with highest probability to be used to satisfy each objective within the decision space allowed by plan management direction. Objective numbers have been refined based on that analysis. Additional objectives were added to more fully round out accomplishment of goals. Direction was screened by the IDT and other Forest Service personnel to ensure that it was clear and implementable.

In the process of responding to comments, changes were also made to plan direction, including allocations, as part of the response. The Forest IDT considered individually each comment that would require a reallocation change to the Plan. They did not make every reallocation or text change recommended. Many of the requested reallocations were found to be already in prescriptions that were protective of the concern expressed, though perhaps not the prescription the commenter preferred. In some cases reallocations desired were so extensive as to have re-created one of the other alternatives.

Supplemental text was added to the EIS or Plan where it was clear there had been a misunderstanding on the part of some of the public of what was intended, or when the usefulness of the documents would be improved. For example, the explanation of the inter-relationship of forestwide and management prescription direction was strengthened. The role of objectives was more fully explained. The use of GIS data and its limitations was also more fully explained.

Specific public concern statements made on the Draft EIS and Draft Plan along with the responses to them are in the FEIS Appendix G - Response to Comments.

There were numerous reallocations of management prescriptions on the Chattahoochee. Recommended wilderness (MRX 1.B) was reduced 63 acres near Tate City to make the recommended boundary coincident with a geographic feature and also avoid future conflict with infrastructure provision into private land. A recommended addition to a scenic section of a wild and scenic river was increased due to a land acquisition. A MRX 4.H area was reallocated to a botanical/zoological area in response to public comments. Botanical and zoological communities were increased by slightly over 2,500 acres. The Trackrock Gap Cultural-Heritage Area was expanded. Identification of administrative and communications sites was refined. Almost 2,700 acres were added to old growth (MRX 6.B). In the largest single acreage change, the Richard Russell-Brasstown Scenic Byway Corridor was reallocated from several prescriptions to the 7.A, Scenic Byway prescription. A block of 8.A.2, Forest Interior Mid to Late Successional Habitat, was reallocated to 8.A.1, Mix of Successional Forest Habitats, in response to public comment on wildlife habitat. An area inappropriately mapped as a source water watershed was corrected. Changes to other prescriptions were as a result of these changes.

Reallocations on the Oconee were less extensive. In response to public comment, a block of land providing access to the Appalachee River was reallocated from a custodial to a recreation emphasis. The Ocmulgee River wild and scenic river mapping was refined from an air-distance buffer to terrain features, resulting in a decrease in acreage. The Scull Shoals Experimental Forest, incorrectly identified as a Regional Forester designation in the draft, was moved from M Rx 4.G.1, Regional Forester Experimental Forest, into M Rx 3.B, Chief-designated Experimental Forest. Almost 600 acres were allocated to M Rx 9.F, Rare Communities, and more acres were allocated to M Rx 4.D, Botanical and Zoological Areas.

Direction in the National Roadless Area Conservation Rule was considered in the period following the issuance of the DEIS. However, the Forest Service was enjoined from applying this direction, subject to ongoing efforts to revise the rule. The Revised Forest Plan addresses protection of those areas in both a forestwide standard and within specific affected management prescriptions. Specifically, it constrains management activities to ensure that inventoried roadless areas continue to meet Forest Service roadless management criteria throughout this plan cycle.

III. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement in the revision process began with the Southern Appalachian Assessment (SAA) conducted from April 1994 to June 1996. The SAA was a collaborative effort among federal and state agencies, universities, special interest groups, and private citizens to produce an ecological assessment of the environment of the Southern Appalachian Mountains eco-region from Virginia to Alabama. The project, spearheaded by the Southern Appalachian Man and the Biosphere cooperative, made no decisions so was therefore outside the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act for public involvement. However, the agencies decided to conduct open working meetings and a number of public meetings to engage the public in an informal, ongoing basis. The public involvement framework of the SAA provided a foundation and influenced the revision of the Land Management Plan of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

Forest level public involvement began with asking for public input to determine the planning issues. From these, 'themes' for alternatives were developed and allocations made to respond to each theme. These themes and allocations were presented to the public at public meetings. Based on response to the themes, additional alternatives were developed and the original themes were refined and improved to become alternatives in their own right. The result was a set of nine different alternatives.

The following list very briefly describes the key opportunities presented for public information sharing, participation and involvement:

- "ECO 21" Newsletter – The ID Team instituted a Forest newsletter to inform people of accomplishments, mileposts or upcoming events. The newsletter was mailed hardcopy to the Forests' planning mailing list of over 3,000 addresses. Many of them were also posted on the Forest internet web site.
- Several sets of open houses were held at night and on weekends to inform the public and receive their issues and comments. A total of sixty public meetings were held on various aspects of the plan revision during the period from August, 1995 through May, 2003.
- Working meetings of the Southern Appalachian planners and specialty teams were held in central locations over an approximately six year period; these meetings were open to the public and provided opportunities for continuing the dialogue begun with the SAA. In addition, individual Forest ID Teams held open, regularly scheduled meetings.
- Press releases to newspapers of local distribution were also used to inform the public of upcoming meetings and release of documents. IDT members fielded many calls from interested individuals and the press throughout the process as well.
- Information meetings were held to scope for issues, to ensure comments had been incorporated correctly, and to present Plan Alternatives in a public forum to receive feedback and critique;
- Collaboration was used to bring government agencies and resource interest organizations into the process to identify issues and establish an open forum for discussion on alternatives and management direction;
- Employee briefings were held at key points in the planning process to provide Forest employees with information, and to collect information pertinent to developing Alternatives and Plan direction for future implementation.

- Information was made available on the Chattahoochee-Oconee Internet website, and on the planning page of the Southern Region's website. The web site was operational in early 1996, and has been used to post Plan revision documents, maps, newsletters, and to solicit comments and input;
- Coordination with Southern Appalachian Forests and the Regional Office staffs during revision has been an emphasis to provide a consistent approach to revision. Through meetings, conference calls and work sessions held throughout the process the five SA Forests have strived to provide the public a consistent message including terminology, meeting dates, documents, direction and analysis.

Some identifiable themes from within and across interests can be characterized here. One common pattern was the view that the interest being expressed was more important than most, or even all, others and ought to be given preference. Another recurring idea was that the specific use of interest to a commenter should not be constrained because other uses were more damaging, or at least until they were constrained first. A frequent misconception was that choices available to the Forest Service are free and unconstrained; that is, there is a large decision space and choices do not cause undesirable or unacceptable consequences to other interests. Some groups supported Congressional designations that would prevent future reconsideration of management status. Though not identified as a public issue (and outside the scope of the plan), the concern centered on Forest Service discretionary authority - who has it and how it is used.

A cross-section of the public favored the principle of a sustainable diversity of native plants and animals with particular attention being given to the rare species and communities. Cutting across interest groups also was an interest in clean water. Protection of visual quality received wide support, especially as an environment supporting all types of recreation both on and off the forest. The concept of a healthy forest receives wide support but opinions differ sharply on how 'health' ought to be defined, how real and urgent various problems are, and what methods ought to be used to deal with them. Restoration also received general support, though people admitted to being unsure just what that meant and some differences of opinion were apparent on how 'managed' restoration should be.

I am well informed regarding the views and desires of the stakeholders with whom we interacted in developing the Revised Forest Plan. This information, together with the work of the planners, scientists, and technicians involved in the plan was most helpful to me in reaching my decision to select Alternative I.

IV. ALTERNATIVES

The following is a brief description of the alternatives considered in the FEIS. The fully developed alternatives, and basis for each, are detailed in the FEIS in Chapter 2, "Comparison of Alternatives." The strength of the alternatives and of this planning process is that the alternatives express a range of responses to concerns and issues raised by the public. The range is not based on predetermined outputs, but rather on the need to be responsive to the issues. The issues are described in detail in the FEIS, Chapter 1, "Purpose and Need," and the FEIS Appendix A, "Summary of Public Involvement." The environmental consequences of the Revised Forest Plan and the alternatives are discussed in the FEIS Chapter 3, "Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences."

A. Alternatives Considered, But Eliminated From Detailed Study

As was described above, we originally framed nine different alternatives. However, as the planning process proceeded, we determined that alternatives C and H did not need to be further evaluated or analyzed in greater detail.

Alternative C

Alternative C would emphasize resource management with minimal human intervention to the natural resources. Active management would only occur for the protection of resources, for meeting legal requirements, and for maintaining current recreation opportunities.

Alternative C was eliminated from detailed study because:

- From further analyses it was determined that this alternative, as originally envisioned, would not meet all the legal requirements of the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA), the Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 (MUSYA) and the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA).
- Alternative C only addresses some, but not all, of the forest planning issues that have been identified by the public.
- Other alternatives considered in detail provide for relatively low levels of management activities.
- Alternative C is similar to the "Minimum Level Benchmark" discussed in the FEIS Appendix B.

Alternative H

Alternative H would provide for active resource management to achieve multiple-use objectives with all lands classified as unsuitable for timber production. There would be timber harvest, but not under a sustainable harvest schedule as is done on suitable forest land.

Alternative H was eliminated from detailed study because the land allocations for this alternative were identical to Alternative A, and therefore, the environmental effects would be essentially the same. The only significant difference between Alternative A and Alternative H was that in Alternative A, the majority of those acres being managed through silvicultural harvesting methods were classified as acres "suitable for timber production," while in Alternative H, those same acres and same management activities would be classified as "unsuited for timber production." Since the main difference is primarily an administrative classification change, and there would be no differences in the overall outputs and environmental effects, it was decided that this alternative did not need to be further considered in detail.

Georgia Blue Ridge National Recreation Area

At one point Chattahoochee-Oconee NF personnel studied a proposal to recommend to Congress the designation of a Blue Ridge National Recreation Area as part of Alternative I. The proposed area of approximately 41,700 acres would have been located in northeast Georgia between the Brasstown, Chattooga, and Tallulah Ranger Districts of the Chattahoochee NF. The area would be about 50 miles from the Atlanta metro area, and 80 miles from the Chattanooga, TN, and Greenville SC metro areas. The NRA proposal was suggested to be a compromise between various interests; some of whom wanted more wildlife management and some who wanted more wilderness acres and more wilderness areas. Because Congress would have designated the NRA, a number of individual management prescriptions would have been eliminated on a separate basis, but could have been included within the designating legislation of the NRA or within a management plan written for it after designation within any constraints imposed by Congress.

This proposal was not included within any alternative because it was not considered to be responsive to any plan revision issue.

B. Alternatives Considered in Detail

All alternatives respond, in varying degrees, to the Forest Health Restoration Act signed into law on December 3, 2003, by allowing for the management of forest vegetation and fuels, thus decreasing fuel-loading problems, the risks to other resources and to adjacent private lands, and the potential for severe wildland fires. Prescribed fire will be utilized to reduce fuel-loading and to maintain fire dependent communities.

Selected Alternative I

In this alternative, adaptive management is emphasized in restoring and maintaining native ecosystems, while providing for balanced human use. This alternative emphasizes the restoration and maintenance of forest ecosystems to provide high-quality water and diverse, resilient, self-reproducing aquatic populations in damaged and undamaged streams. Riparian areas would be managed to retain, restore and/or enhance the inherent ecological processes and functions of the associated aquatic, riparian, and upland components within riparian corridors.

Also emphasized would be the sustainability of diverse ecosystems that support viable plant, wildlife and fish populations including habitats for those species needing large contiguous forested landscapes. There would be a variety of old growth communities to meet biological and social needs. Forest health would be a priority to ensure a forest that is resistant to large-scale, catastrophic plant mortality from insects or disease, especially from non-native invasives.

This alternative would provide high quality, nature-based recreation opportunities, emphasizing non-motorized settings with natural appearing landscapes and those landscapes that are not widely available on non-Federal lands. Inventoried roadless areas, outstandingly remarkable river values, and areas with high scenic integrity, including scenic views at a range of distances, would be protected. The Forest Service road system would be managed at the minimum level needed to implement this alternative and achieve the management objectives of the alternatives.

Alternative A

Alternative A would emphasize production of goods and services beneficial to local economies and communities. Local communities include any community that benefits economically from forest visitors and forest products. Timber management would provide sustained yield of wood products with emphasis on high-quality sawtimber. In areas where vegetation management is permitted, it would be actively pursued to reach and maintain a condition of low risk of insect and disease problems, especially in those areas where timber production would be emphasized. Wildlife management would put priority on public-demand species, including game and other species.

Highways and roads in the forests, trail and river corridors, and recreation-use areas would have forest stands with few, if any, broken views. Improved scenery values support tourism and local, rural economies. Developed and dispersed recreation opportunities and high-quality scenery would be provided in a variety of settings both natural and managed. Public access via travelways, use corridors, waterways, and trails (including those for off-highway vehicles) would be increased or improved in high-use areas to provide for more recreation opportunities.

Restoration of degraded watersheds would be expanded to improve aquatic habitats and water quality. Old-growth allocation and management would be primarily on lands already withdrawn from the suitable timber base in the current Forest Plan. SAA-inventoried roadless areas adjacent to, or in close proximity to, wilderness areas that receive high use would also be recommended for wilderness designation.

Alternative B

Alternative B would be biologically driven and would emphasize restoring the natural resources and natural processes and creating and maintaining wildlife habitats. Emphasis would be on restoration of vegetation to potential natural plant associations based on the ecological potential and capability of the land, and providing a mix of wildlife habitats for game and non-game species. Restoration activities would occur in areas where the technology is available to implement. When possible, natural processes would be mimicked in a natural landscape pattern. Restoration activities could produce both large and small openings. Long-term restoration goals would be established for areas where technology is not currently available, or for areas where restoration activities cannot be implemented or completed within the life of the revised Forest Plan. A variety of recreation settings would occur in areas where they would be compatible with restoration activities and in areas where restoration is not occurring. Wood products would be managed in concert with restoration and creating wildlife habitats. Timber sales would become a by-product of restoration management and wildlife habitats.

The long-term goal would be to provide old-growth conditions by old-growth community types within the ecological province or section similar to that existing before large-scale, extensive pioneer settlement and land uses. Riparian ecosystems would be managed to maintain water quality and aquatic ecosystems and to restore degraded conditions. Timber production would be a result of management to restore and maintain specific impaired or degraded resources, natural processes, communities, and wildlife habitats. In some areas of the forests, scenic resources would move gradually toward “high” to “very high” scenic integrity. Restoration of areas would result in short-term, “low” to “moderate” scenic integrity, but with a long-term goal of a “high” rating. A wide variety of recreation opportunities would be provided. Roadless areas with identified forest type restoration needs or wildlife habitat needs in conflict with wilderness designation would not be recommended for wilderness; other roadless areas could be recommended for wilderness study. The role of native insects and disease would be accepted, except that epidemics would be suppressed to reduce large-scale catastrophic tree mortality. Exotics such as beech scale, gypsy moth, hemlock woolly adelgid, Japanese privet, and kudzu would be controlled. Any riparian restoration needs would be made compatible with wild and scenic river classification and its outstandingly remarkable values. Access to degraded resources, areas in need of restoration, or areas where wildlife habitat needs occur could be temporarily provided to maintain or restore desirable ecological conditions. Access would be reduced as needed to restore and protect aquatic systems, soils, and plant/animal communities.

Alternative D

A major objective of Alternative D would be to reach and maintain a balanced age class. All lands not meeting National Forest Management Act criteria as being unsuitable for sustained yield timber management would be available for sustained-yield management. On suitable lands, each of the major forest groups (pine, mixed, and hardwood) would have a specific target rotation age, the age at which it would be harvested and replaced with a new forest.

There would be an approximately equal number of acres within each 10-year age class up to that rotation age. This “balance of age classes'' would occur on lands identified as suitable and would be distributed in 15- to 40-acre blocks throughout the lands being managed for sustained-yield timber production. Pine, mixed, and hardwood forests older than the rotation age also would occur on large blocks of land already withdrawn from sustained-yield timber production. Production of both commercial wood products and a variety of aquatics/wildlife habitats would be emphasized. Developed and dispersed recreation opportunities would be provided in a variety of settings, both natural and managed. Water quality and riparian corridors would be protected through BMPs, streamside management zones, and standards. Restoration would be pursued, if needed. Streamside management zones would be included in the suitable timber base, with minimum widths based on applicable regulations.

Large- and medium-sized blocks of old growth would be provided only on unsuitable land. Small blocks would occur scattered throughout the suitable lands on steep slopes, streamside management zones, or similar areas. The forests would appear highly variable in tree sizes and openings in the canopy may be seen from roadways and vista points. Potential roaded natural (RN 1 and 2) experiences would increase as access roads for timber harvest are built or improved. The semi-primitive experiences would be primarily on unsuited lands. Only those roadless areas that are already withdrawn from sustained-yield timber production by Congress, the Secretary of Agriculture, or the Chief of the Forest Service would be recommended as wilderness. Insects, diseases, and exotic plant and animal species on suitable lands would be actively controlled and prevented. Some of the eligible wild and scenic rivers would be recommended for inclusion to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Access would be developed, maintained, and used as needed to meet the goal of balanced age classes, wildlife habitats, and production of timber products.

Alternative E

A combination of a natural setting and concentrated facilities that could attract a variety of recreation users would be provided. Active resource management would be concentrated in certain locations and would support recreation use and visual quality. Most areas would maintain a forested canopy. Large blocks of the forest would be maintained in a roadless condition to provide remote backcountry recreation. Dispersed and developed recreation areas and opportunities would be increased. A variety of recreation experiences would occur including concentrated use and off-highway vehicle use. A variety of different wildlife habitats would be maintained in blocks across the landscape. Habitat for forest interior species would be accomplished through maintenance of a variety of successional classes in a manner that would be unnoticeable to most forest visitors. A substantial amount of the forest would be allocated to providing old growth for biological and aesthetic values in large, medium, and small patches.

Riparian ecosystems and streamside management zones would be designated, through allocation or standards and guidelines, to provide water-quality protection and improvement. The overall long-term timber product objective would be large-diameter and high-quality sawtimber for species capable of reaching that objective. Highways and roads in the forests, trail and river corridors, view sheds, and recreation-use areas would have forest stands with few, if any, broken views to support enhancements in tourism and local, rural economies. Many insect and disease impacts would be tolerated as part of a functioning natural ecosystem. Most wild and scenic rivers would be recommended for adding to the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, with primary emphasis on protecting the resources. Public access via travelways, use corridors, waterways, and trails (including those for off-highway vehicles) would be increased in high-use areas and/or improved to provide for more recreation opportunities.

Alternative F – Current Management (the No-Action Alternative)

This alternative represents continued use of the 1985 Plan as amended. The Forest would be managed to provide a balance between timber and recreation. Average annual timber production would be approximately the same as the last ten years. Recreation and wildlife habitat manipulations would receive increased emphasis. All SAA-inventoried roadless areas would be studied for wilderness inclusion. Rivers that meet the inclusion criteria for the Wild and Scenic River system would be placed into a forest management prescription of 4.H (Chattahoochee-Oconee Outstandingly Remarkable Streams.) Roadless areas would be allocated into management prescriptions that would protect the areas roadless character.

Alternative G

Alternative G would use land allocations to link movement corridors and large undisturbed areas, as well as areas of special effort such as T&E species protection, species reintroduction, and watershed restoration. National Forest System lands would provide habitat for forest interior species and a wide diversity of native plants and animals, particularly late-successional species. Habitats on private

lands would be considered. Backcountry, late-successional wildlife species, and nature-oriented nonmotorized recreation opportunities would be emphasized. Most roadless areas would be recommended for wilderness. Old-growth restoration areas would be developed around clusters of existing old growth. Mature forests with old-growth characteristics would provide natural old-growth dynamics across the landscape of the Southern Appalachians. High-quality timber would be produced in long rotations in areas outside forest interior species habitat, movement corridors, and large undisturbed areas and would be accessed from existing roads. Effects of native insects and diseases would be accepted. Emphasis would be on establishing a naturally resilient forest that would avoid large outbreaks of forest pests. Fire would be used to restore natural ecosystem processes. Road network mileage would be reduced through closure and obliteration of roads not needed for ecosystem stewardship or restoration.

Emphasis would be on inventory, monitoring, conservation, and recovery of proposed, threatened, endangered, sensitive, and locally rare species. Riparian areas would be maintained as old growth for habitat and connectivity. Riparian area protection and restoration would be emphasized through watershed assessments and establishment of riparian conservation areas and reference watersheds. Naturally evolving and naturally appearing landscapes would be pre-dominant. Recreation would take place within a context set by habitat needs and ecosystem function.

Semi-primitive, wildlife- and nature-oriented recreation opportunities would be emphasized. Developed facilities would be located where they do not detract from ecosystem function and landscape connectivity. Roadless areas would be maintained for unfragmented wildlife habitat, landscape linkages, old-growth restoration, wilderness designation, and other management that would maintain their non-fragmented habitat and ecosystem function. Nonnative invasive pests would be controlled by means that least impact ecosystem function and non-fragmented habitat across the landscape. Eligible rivers would be recommended for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

Opportunities to provide for many of the desired conditions such as connected habitats, movement corridors, and large undisturbed areas would be limited in the Piedmont and Coastal Plains due to landownership patterns and red-cockaded woodpecker management needs.

V. FINDINGS RELATED TO OTHER LAWS AND AUTHORITIES AND FOREST SERVICE DECISIONS

I have considered the statutes governing management of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, and I believe that this decision represents the best possible approach to both harmonizing and reconciling the current statutory duties of the Forest Service.

Clean Air Act

As discussed in the FEIS, Chapter 3, Physical Elements, Air, all lands managed by the Forest are currently in attainment with National Ambient Air Quality Standards. Compliance with air quality statutes is directed in the Revised Forest Plan, Chapter 2, Air Quality Management.

Clean Water Act

The Revised Forest Plan contains direction to ensure all projects meet or exceed the requirements of the Clean Water Act. This direction is found in the Revised Forest Plan, Chapter 2 - primarily in the 'Watershed Management' section, but with related direction in Chapter 3, riparian corridor management prescription 11, as well. In addition, water quality related goals, objectives and standards are woven throughout Plan direction. A watershed health assessment was completed at the 5th level hydrologic unit scale to show the current condition of watersheds on the Forest. This information is found in the FEIS Chapter 3: Physical Elements, Watersheds. Sources of additional

implementation guidance include: (a) Georgia's Best Management Practices for Forestry, (b) the Manual for Erosion and Sediment Control in Georgia, or (c) resource-specific Forest Service Handbooks. The Best Management Practices are designed primarily to protect water quality as required by Section 208 of the Clean Water Act.

Implementation of the Revised Forest Plan is expected to contribute to protecting or restoring the physical, chemical and biological integrity of water of the United States in accordance with the Act.

National Historic Preservation Act

In accordance with a Memorandum of Understanding with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, Forest Plans are not undertakings under the National Historic Preservation Act. Consultation pursuant to Section 106 of the Act is not required at the Forest Plan level. As discussed in the Heritage Resources section of Chapter 3 of the FEIS, activities in the Revised Forest Plan will be in compliance with the Act. Conformance with the Act is directed in the Revised Forest Plan in Chapter 2: Heritage Resources.

Endangered Species Act

This decision is made with the benefit of extensive consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service on the Revised Forest Plan and EIS. The USFWS was a partner in completing species viability assessments and helping develop wildlife habitat objectives. They were provided advance copies of the Revised Forest Plan, FEIS and the Biological Assessment (BA). Their recommendations were included in the final plan. The BA assessed effects to federally-designated proposed, threatened or endangered species that occur or could occur on the Forests. The USFWS concurred with the Forest Service's determination of effects in the BA that implementation of Alternative I for the Forest Plan Revision is "not likely to adversely affect" federally-listed endangered or threatened species or their habitats.

Further consultation with USFWS will be part of site-specific evaluations for project-level decisions.

Roadless Area Conservation Rule

On January 12, 2001, the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (RACR) was published in the Federal Register (36 CFR 294). The Roadless Area Conservation Rule prohibited - with certain exceptions - road construction and reconstruction activities; and the timber cutting, sale, or removal activities that could occur in the inventoried roadless areas (IRAs) identified in the RACR FEIS. The RACR in 36 CFR 294.12 and 294.13, identified the exceptions where road construction/reconstruction activities and timber cutting/removal activities would be allowed. The RACR had an effective date of March 13, 2001. This effective date was later delayed until May 12, 2001.

Subsequently, several groups and States filed lawsuits challenging the RACR. On July 14, 2003, the United States District Court, Wyoming District (Judge Clarence Brimmer) found the Roadless Area Conservation Rule to be in violation of the National Environmental Policy Act and the Wilderness Act, and permanently enjoined its implementation and set the rule aside. The effect of this ruling is that direction for inventoried roadless areas reverts to the direction provided in the Revised Forest Plan. However, this issue is not settled. Appeals of the Wyoming District Court decision, other litigation, new rulemaking, or new Forest Service directives could result in a change in direction for the management of inventoried roadless areas.

The management approach in this Revised Forest Plan conserves the roadless character of inventoried roadless areas. Portions of some of them are allocated to prescriptions that could - if not otherwise constrained - allow activities that would cause the area to no longer meet roadless criteria in its original size and shape. However, a forestwide standard requires that the ability to meet Forest Service roadless criteria will be maintained within each roadless area as inventoried. With this

standard in effect, the option of reconsideration in the next cycle of planning remains open. (See the section on "Roadless Area Conservation Rule" in Chapter 3 of the FEIS for more information.)

In managing the roadless areas, the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest will follow the management direction contained in this Revised Forest Plan and any Forest Service policy on roadless area management specified in the Forest Service directives. However, should the RACR become effective, it will supercede this Revised Plan for those inventoried roadless areas identified in the RACR FEIS that was completed in November 2000. This would mean that those areas in the Revised Forest Plan that are identified as available for treatment, could not be treated unless they meet the exceptions in the RACR. According to 36 CFR 294.14(b), should the RACR become effective, an amendment to this Revised Forest Plan would not be needed to implement its direction.

Other Forest Service Decisions with Management Direction

Other decisions that apply to the management of the Forest includes the Records of Decision for the red-cockaded Woodpecker EIS, the Gypsy Moth EIS, and the Southern Pine Beetle EIS.

VI. IMPLEMENTATION

The direction in the Revised Forest Plan will become effective 30 days after the publication of the Notice of Availability (NOA) of the Final Environmental Impact Statement in the Federal Register.

Under NFMA, "permits, contracts, and other instruments for the use and occupancy" of National Forest System lands are required to be "consistent" with the current Land and Resource Management Plan (16 U.S.C. 1604(i)). In the plan revision context, NFMA specifically qualifies the requirement in three ways: 1) these documents must be revised only "when necessary," 2) these documents must be revised "as soon as practicable," and 3) any revisions are "subject to valid existing rights."

In developing this Revised Plan, implementing pre-existing decisions and the associated effects of that implementation were considered part of the baseline against which the alternatives were evaluated. Because these earlier decisions were considered in our effects analysis, their implementation is not in conflict with the Revised Plan. Exercising my discretion under NFMA, I have determined that it is not "necessary" to apply the standards of the Revised Plan retroactively, and I find that NFMA does not require revision of these pre-existing use and occupancy authorizations. As soon as practicable after approval of the Revised Plan, the Forest Supervisor shall ensure that, subject to valid existing rights, all outstanding and future permits, contracts, cooperative agreements, and other instruments for occupancy and use of affected lands are consistent with the Revised Plan. On a case-by-case basis, the Forest Supervisor shall exercise his/her sound discretion in determining when such consistency is practicable.

"Use and occupancy" agreements include contracts for timber harvesting. Most timber sale decisions are implemented through a three-year contract. While a timber sale contract is a valid existing right, the terms of the contract allow modification. Therefore, modification of a timber contract under its terms would not violate the "valid existing right" provision. Nevertheless, I have decided not to modify any existing timber sale contracts solely due to the Revised Forest Plan. As stated earlier, these contracts were considered part of the baseline against which the alternatives were evaluated. Finally, existing timber contracts will generally have been completed within three years. The decision will be left to the Forest Supervisor to determine whether to modify any decisions authorizing timber sales not currently under contract.

Other classes of "use and occupancy" agreements will be reviewed to determine whether or when the Forest Supervisor should exercise discretion to bring them into compliance with the Revised Plan.

The Forest Supervisor will accomplish many management activities to implement the Revised Plan. Unlike the programmatic decisions listed previously, these activities are site-specific and may require analysis and disclosure of effects under NEPA. These site-specific analyses will be done during implementation of the Revised Plan.

Forest Plans are permissive in that they allow, but do not mandate, the occurrence of certain activities. Site-specific analysis of proposed activities will determine what can be accomplished. The outputs specified in the Revised Plan are estimates and projections based on available information, inventory data, and assumptions.

All activities, many of which are interdependent, may be affected by annual budgets. However, the goals, objectives, standards, management prescriptions, and monitoring questions described in the Revised Plan may not change unless the Plan is amended.

VII. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The monitoring and evaluation program is the quality-control system for a Forest Plan. This program is described in Chapter 5, “Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Implementation," of the Revised Forest Plan. Monitoring and evaluation receive major emphasis in this revision and will inform us of progress toward reaching management goals and objectives. This information will be evaluated and used to update inventory data, to improve current and future mitigation measures, and to assess the need for amending or revising the Revised Forest Plan. Thorough evaluation of monitoring results is directly linked to the decision maker's ability to respond to changing conditions, emerging trends, public concerns, and new information and technology. No single monitoring item or parameter automatically triggers a change in Revised Forest Plan direction. An interdisciplinary, holistic approach is used to evaluate information and decide what changes are needed.

Specific monitoring questions are identified and directly linked to Revised Forest Plan goals, desired future conditions, objectives, standards, and specific regulatory requirements. Every goal, objective, or standard cannot be monitored individually. Relevancy to issues, compliance with legal and agency policy, scientific credibility, administrative feasibility, long- and short-term budget considerations, and impact on work force all influence monitoring priorities. High priority monitoring items include those listed in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biological opinion on the Revised Forest Plan. A range of acceptable approaches have been identified to monitor and evaluate the forestwide status and trends of habitats and populations for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species or for those species selected as management indicator species. Approaches that can be applied in monitoring a species include one or more of the following: (1) measurement of habitat conditions and trends for species, (2) the use of population occurrence and presence/absence data, (3) the use of population indices to track relative population trends, (4) actual population estimates and demographic information (usually reserved for some federally-listed species or high risk globally impaired species), and (5) development of research studies to determine species/habitat relationships and species responses to conditions created by land management activities.

Each monitoring question has a monitoring item or items to answer the question. For each monitoring question, a monitoring task sheet has been developed. These task sheets are used to develop the details, priorities, and budgeting for answering the monitoring questions. The task sheets are not part of my decision but are in the implementation guidance for information. Changes to task sheets will not require a Forest Plan amendment.

Public participation is vital as we monitor our progress. We will work with partners and cooperators in developing and carrying out monitoring activities. Activities, findings, and results will be shared with the public at least annually. The public will be invited to review the results and recommend changes based on monitoring findings, emerging issues or new information.

VIII. PLAN AMENDMENT AND REVISION

The Plan will be amended or revised to adjust to changing circumstances. For example, the management goals, objectives, and standards stated for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests in the Revised Forest Plan may, in the near future, be in need of updating or amendment in order to come in line with later assessments or analyses. The amendment process gives us the flexibility to adapt the decisions made today to the realities of tomorrow. We will provide opportunities to the public to be involved in future changes to the Revised Plan.

The Revised Forest Plan is a dynamic instrument that can be changed with appropriate public involvement and environmental analysis. Through the life of the Revised Forest Plan, amendments may be needed to incorporate new information, new policy and direction, or changing values and resource conditions. Amendments will keep the Forest Plan current, relevant, and responsive to agency and public concerns. Amendments are needed whenever any of the Revised Forest Plan decisions should be changed due to any of the above conditions. The Revised Forest Plan also can be amended for specific projects, if during project design, it is determined that the best method of meeting goals and objectives conflicts with existing standards and guidelines.

Amendments may be significant or nonsignificant. The Forest Supervisor may implement nonsignificant amendments to the Revised Forest Plan after appropriate public involvement and environmental analysis. Significant amendments are currently approved by the Regional Forester.

IX. APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is subject to administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR 217. A written appeal of this decision must be filed in duplicate within 90 days of the date of the published legal notices. Appeals must be filed with:

USDA Forest Service
Attn: NFS-EMC Staff (Barbara Timberlake)
Stop Code 1104
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-1104

Any notice of appeal must be fully consistent with 36 CRF 217.9 and include at a minimum:

- A statement that the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR part 217;
- The name, address, and telephone number of the appellant;
- Identification of the decision to which the appeal is being made;
- Identification of the document in which the decision is contained, by title and subject, date of the decision, and name and title of the Deciding Officer
- Identification of the specific portion of the decision to which appeal is made
- The reasons for appeal, including issues of fact, law, regulation, or policy and, if applicable, specifically how the decision violates law, regulation, or policy
- Identification of the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks.

Requests to stay implementation of the Revised forest Plan will not be granted (36 CFR 217.10(a))

Final decisions on proposed projects will be made on a site-specific basis using appropriate analysis and documentation and in compliance with NEPA. Project decisions may be subject to appeal at that time.

USDA Forest Service
Attention: Ecosystem Management Staff (Steve Segovia)
P.O. Box 96090

Washington, D.C. 20090-6090
(202) 205-1066)

For questions concerning the Revised Forest Plan, contact:

Kathleen Atkinson
Forest Supervisor
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest
1755 Cleveland Highway
Gainesville, GA 30501
(770) 297-3000

Reviewers are encouraged to contact the Forest Supervisor before submitting appeals to determine if misunderstandings or concerns can be clarified or resolved.

X. APPROVAL

I am pleased to announce my decision and bring this phase of forest planning to completion. This Forest Plan has been built on a strong foundation of citizen collaboration and the best available science.

As we move forward we will carefully monitor our activities, the condition of the land, the goods and services produced, and the effectiveness of the resource protection measures included in the Revised Forest Plan. I anticipate that implementation of the plan will be conducted in the same spirit of partnership that has characterized this revision process. Working together we can meet the challenges, realize the opportunities, and achieve the goals and objectives of the Chattahoochee-Oconee Land and Resource Management Plan.

Robert T. Jacobs

ROBERT T. JACOBS
Regional Forester
Southern Region
USDA Forest Service

1/15/2004
Date