

Bankhead Liaison Panel Meeting Summary March 27, 2003

Moulton Recreation Center – Moulton, AL

APPROVED (For general distribution) 4/17/03

Attendance

Liaison Panel Members:

Myra Ball, *Conservation and Multi-Use*
Charles Borden, *Resident, Recreationist, and Wild
Alabama Board member*
Margaret Dunn, *Cherokee Tribe of NE Alabama*
Ron Eakes, *Ala. Div. of Wildlife & Freshwater
Fisheries; Area Manager, Black Warrior WMA*
Randy Feltman, *Logger and Local Resident*
Gene Gold, *Echota Cherokee of Alabama*
Mike Henshaw, *Winston Co. Forest Planning
Committee*
*Vince Meleski, *Wild Alabama*
Mary Lee Ratliff, *Recreation*
Bill Snoddy, *Treasure Forest Landowner*
Keith Tassin, *The Nature Conservancy*
Johnny Dean Warren, *Resident*
*Faron Weeks, *Bankhead Cultural and Historical
Society*

* denotes Alternate Panel Member

USFS Personnel:

Allison Cochran, *Bankhead District*
Tom Counts, *Bankhead District*
John Creed, *Bankhead District*
Glen Gaines, *District Ranger*
Rick Morgan, *Montgomery Office*
Kathy Wallace, *Bankhead District*

Interested People/ Other Attendees:

Sheron Ball
Rory Fraser
*Gene Johnson (Alternate)
*Jeff Still (Alternate)
Janet [unknown last name]

Facilitation Staff:

Mary Lou Addor, *Natural Resources Leadership Institute*
Juliana Birkhoff, *RESOLVE*
Bill Sanford, *Natural Resources Leadership Institute*

March 27, 2003 Meeting Agenda

5:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.

1. Review USFS Planning Processes and Plans to Clarify Context for the Health and Restoration Initiative
2. Welcome and Review Meeting Agenda and Objectives
3. Bankhead Wildlife and Plant Ecology
4. Share Interests
5. Review Five Health and Restoration Initiative Alternatives and Discuss How They Meet Panel Members' Interests

Handouts Provided

1. Meeting Agenda: March 27
2. Wildlife Presentation for the Bankhead Liaison Panel
3. Wildfire Smoke and Your Health
4. Draft Meeting Summary: Mar. 8
5. Panel Contact Information (rev. 3/18/03)
6. Handouts from past meetings: Consensus Decision Making; Operating Agreement; Meeting Ground Rules; Training materials (2 packets)
7. Approved meeting summaries (Jan. & Feb., sent by email prior to meeting)

Action Items:

1. The facilitators will use “Rich Text Format” when emailing documents to Panel members as well as attachments. Approved meeting summaries will be distributed to the Panel members.
2. Ron Eakes will draft a paragraph to clarify section G (page 8) of the March 8 meeting summary, and email it to Mary Lou prior to April 17th.
3. Mary Lou will ask technical experts to clarify a section on March 8th meeting summary. Once all revised sections are received, the revised sections will be sent to the Liaison Panel for review/comment.
4. Myra Ball will provide Internet links and/or journal articles on the topic of private landowners, fire, and the spread of SPB.
5. The pie charts from the wildlife presentation will be posted on the Internet.
6. The USFS staff will place hard copies of the pie charts at the ranger district and local libraries.
7. The next Steering Committee meeting will be held on April 7 (4:00 p.m. CT).

Format Key:

Questions (Q), Response (R), Comment (C), Discussion (D) & Action (A).

I. USFS PLANNING PROCESSES

Rick Morgan, Staff Officer for Land Management Planning and Natural Resources from the US Forest Service (USFS) office in Montgomery, gave a presentation on USFS planning processes. He outlined six processes and answered questions from the Panel to clarify how the Bankhead Forest Health and Restoration Initiative fits in with the other plans. Key points from Rick’s presentation follow.

A. Revised Land Management Plan (DRAFT)

The process of creating this revised plan began in 1996, under 1982 regulations. A draft has been completed. A 90-day public comment period will begin in early April. A public meeting will be held in [redacted] on April 8, in which the plan will be presented. Another meeting will be held April 30 in [redacted], in order to solicit public input.

B. Forest Health and Restoration Initiative

This project in the Bankhead Forest is what the Liaison Panel is working on. The USFS is creating an EIS, which needs to tie into the current land management plan as well as the

standards in the revised plan. Draft to be completed in June.

C. Healthy Forests Initiative

This is a national initiative involving the Council on Environmental Quality, which oversees compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

D. Revised Planning Rule, 2002

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA, 1976) requires each National Forest to have an integrated forest management plan. The rule is a set of regulations to implement NFMA – steps and requirements to establish a land management plan. More information is available online.

E. Fire Management Exclusions (Proposed)

Categorical exclusions (CEs) are activities the USFS has engaged in which have not created significant environmental damage (for example, mowing the lawn at the district ranger station). Once a practice has been identified as a categorical exclusion, the USFS can utilize it more quickly and with less paperwork. Prescribed burning is a

categorical exclusion. Other fire management categorical exclusions may affect the Health and Restoration Initiative.

F. Forest Management, Insect/Disease Categorical Exclusions (Proposed)
Proposed categorical exclusions.

Questions, Answers, and Discussion

- C The Forest Health and Restoration Initiative will not have CEs.
- Q How would the proposed new rule affect the Health and Restoration Initiative?
- R It will not affect it on the ground. The rule is about the process of how to create a plan, not the content of the plan itself.
- Q Do CEs bypass public involvement?
- R No. NEPA requires public involvement, even for CEs.
- Q Will the proposed Insect/Disease CEs affect tornado/salvage timber?
- R If implemented, yes, they will. One talks about salvage and another talks about insect/disease control. The agency is trying to improve the process and to make sure we're environmentally correct, too.
- Q Aside from the Forest Management Plan, will any of these plans affect the Health and Restoration Initiative?
- R We think we've met the Healthy Forests Initiative, which is mostly geared to Western forests. Our process is geared around what the forest will look like, not fuel reduction, etc.
- Q Are the limitations listed regarding CEs (50 acres, 250 acres, etc.) per sale, per corridor, or per what?
- R They are measured per activity. If area has been affected by tornado, and it is less than 250 acres, then 250 would be the limit. If another area somewhere else in the forest were affected, it would be covered by that same limit, too. Also, to use a CE, there must be no extraordinary circumstances. The presence of

T&E species, steep slope, etc. may preclude the use of a CE.

- C A difference between a CE and an Environmental Assessment(EA)/ Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), is that the public doesn't have right of appeal with an CE.
- C There is a proposal out there to change the appeal process, as well.
- Q Many CEs are eliminating NEPA requirements, right?
- R CEs are part of NEPA. It is a process involved with each kind of action.
- C The Health and Restoration Initiative is at the project level. The Land Management Plan is for all National Forests in Alabama.
- C The Health and Restoration Initiative must be consistent with the Land Management Plan, and the Land Management Plan is consistent with regional plan.
- Q How many more processes before the Forest Health and Restoration Initiative becomes finalized?
- R When Glen Gaines signs the Health and Restoration Initiative, it is over. He will talk to the planning team and supervisor in Montgomery to have it approved, but once he signs it, it is over.
- R Because the Health and Restoration Initiative is an EIS, it must put it out for comment period.
- C June date is the Federal Register publication date. The initiative will be finalized in September.
- Q Will the April 8 meeting offer more information on the Land Management Plan than was covered here tonight?
- R Yes. See Glen for more info.

II. WELCOME, AGENDA, AND MEETING GROUND RULES

A. Welcome

Mary Lou Addor, Juliana Birkhoff, and Bill Sanford welcomed those present and reviewed the handouts.

- A In the future, the facilitators will use “Rich Text Format” when emailing documents to Panel members. Hopefully, this will ensure that everyone can open the documents that are emailed.

B. Agenda

Juliana reviewed the agenda and listed five objectives for the meeting:

- Review Other USFS Management Plans and Processes and Clarify How They Coordinate with Health and Restoration Initiative Plans and Timeline
- Discuss Liaison Panel Members Interests about the Health and Restoration Initiative
- Learn about the Potential Benefits and Impacts of the Health and Restoration Initiative on Wildlife and Plants
- Review Five Health and Restoration Initiatives and Discuss How They Meet Liaison Panel Members Interests
- Discuss Between Meeting Work and Agenda for April 17th.

C. March 8 Meeting Summary

Mary Lou reviewed the March 8 meeting summary, including additional comments of clarification provided by Dale Brockway and Callie regarding the March 8 meeting summary.

- A Ron Eakes will draft a paragraph to clarify section G on page 8 of the draft summary, and will email it to Mary Lou.
- A Mary Lou will submit a section for additional comment to the technical experts from the March 8 meeting for their comments before sending the revised version back to the Panel for final approval.

III. BANKHEAD WILDLIFE AND PLANT ECOLOGY

Allison Cochran (biological scientist technician, USFS), Tom Counts (District Wildlife Biologist), and Ron Eakes (AL Dept of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries) gave a presentation designed to answer the Panel’s questions dealing with plants and wildlife. Rob Hurt (US Fish and Wildlife Service) had planned to join them in this presentation, but was unable to attend.

The presentation reviewed basic laws regarding wildlife, endangered species issues, how the alternatives will affect animals’ habitats (including treatment impacts), what the desired future conditions will look like, and managing wildlife for indigenous species.

Copies of the presenters’ handouts are available from the USFS or the facilitators. Key parts of the conversation around the presentation are summarized below.

Q What makes something a “**locally rare**” species?

R “Locally rare” status is tracked and determined by the Alabama Natural Heritage Program.

Q The slides look like they are all about birds. **What about the other animals?**

R We know a lot about birds, so we are just using them as examples here. Other animals are discussed later in this presentation.

Q **Do you need open or “meta”-areas** to get a mix of game animals, squirrels, etc.? For example, does dry-mesic oak forest have all it needs for the birds, or would you have to make a wildlife opening?

R Few wildlife require just a single habitat type for an entire annual or life cycle, so they cross into other habitats. Resident species must be able to meet all of their needs here in the forest, though, whether in one habitat or several.

- C **Flames from prescribed burns** are usually only about 4 inches tall. The fire does not kill everything. It helps release nutrients to stimulate native seeds.
- Q **How do prescribed burns affect Southern Pine Beetle (SPB) infestation?**
- R We do not know much about the effects of fire on SPB. We do know that fire helps release nutrients, and that vigorous pine stands are not as vulnerable to SPB as weaker stands. We think prescribed burns may help.
- C If the burns are scorching, then they could weaken the stands.
- R Correct. Scorching burns would not be used in those areas. We're talking about much smaller, cooler fires.
- A Myra Ball will provide Internet links and/or journal articles on the topic of private landowners, fire, and the spread of SPB.
- C Even with **artificial regeneration**, we cannot necessarily control everything. Pine, for example, will appear on disturbed sites, via re-sprouting or re-seeding.
- Q **Under these alternatives, will the forest still have openings 100 years from now? Are they even necessary?**
- R The Land Management Plan provides percentages of early successional habitat.
- C This EIS is for the desired future conditions. With restoring the American Chestnut, for example, we do not envision having 30-acre blocks of regenerated areas in the forest.
- R Regarding openings, some species like closed canopies. They don't need grassy or early successional areas nearby. Also, there are natural variations within each area. Even in a "burn" area, for example, one patch may be holding water, so it won't burn. The forest has and will have a mosaic quality.
- Q What will we do to maintain variety in ages/stages of the forest communities?
- R It depends on the alternatives chosen. Succession can be stopped at any point.
- C Regarding **the animals visitors like to see** (for example, deer, turkey, squirrels, and raccoons), most require some disturbance in their habitat. You are more likely to see them around edges and openings, versus where there are closed canopies. Openings also provide soft mast, which is available as a food source in those years when hard mast is not (approximately once every 5 years). For these sorts of wildlife, the understory is probably more important than the overstory.
- Q How much of the **Black Warrior Wildlife Management Area** will be affected by this initiative?
- R Most of it. Of the 45,000 acres in the Area outside the 26,000-acre wilderness, 15,000-20,000 will be affected.
- C Of the various forest community types listed in the pie charts, three are "**fire dependent**" – Oak Woodlands, Longleaf Pine Woodlands, and Shortleaf Pine Woodlands.
- C **Oak Woodlands** would be suitable early successional areas for game and other visible species.
- C In the alternatives, the emphasis on **Area 1** is on hardwoods and supporting species that like continuous canopies. Fire will not play much of a role here, except in alternative 5.
- C Under alternatives 3, 4, and 6, Area 1 would provide "marginal" **game habitat**. In those alternatives, there is no funding to create openings in the canopy.
- C Charles Borden said it was important to him that Area 1 have some wildlife (game) areas.
- C We could have some continuous disturbance areas where loblolly pines are.
- R That would be very expensive.
- Q **What was the thinking behind alternative 3, Area 1, regarding wildlife?**
- R When creating the alternatives, we were not just looking from wildlife standpoint. Area 1 was where we wanted to concentrate for deciduous forests (e.g. American chestnut).

When started to look at this, we saw that it would not be textbook good turkey conditions, so that's where we got to the idea of using fire as tool. We can't burn 20-acre packages, though. In alternative 3, most of the early successional are in Areas 2 & 3. This issue is a big concern for hunters and the Division of Game and Wildlife, though.

- Q **In desired conditions 100 years from now, do we want wildlife a part of Area 1?** I thought so, but I'm open to other ideas.
- R Wildlife *does* come with alternatives 3,4, and 6, but not early successional species in Area 1.
- C Area 1 has special **cultural and botanical areas**, too. The alternatives are not just about wildlife.
- C Suggestion: use the existing 40-80 acre pine plantations to help create game habitat. Could clear-cut the pine and put into early successional, then could thin to provide different levels of habitat. Could stair-step areas and cut them back every 30 years. This would provide revenue and would solve a lot of problems. You could even turn a small patch in middle into hardwood. You would have three areas: pre-thin, thin, and clear-cut.
- C So, this would be the same desired future conditions, but using different treatment options.
- R These pie charts are way out in future. We will still have loblollies. When we get SPBs areas, that will make new open areas with groundcover, etc. For 50-60 years, that will be very good for wildlife habitat.
- C Keep in mind that **these percentages in the future conditions will not shift overnight**, say from 0% to 30%. We are looking at a gradual shift over a few decades.
- Q We're talking in abstracts. Why don't we go look? The pie charts are biased. Early successional areas include private lands. I can take you to two prescribed burns, one hot one not.

- C Can help the group find a spot to visit.
- Q It is important that **deer and turkey populations** not be decreased, and they should have the potential for increase within the plan. How could we best manage to accomplish that? How, with the least alteration from the proposed alternatives, could we also accomplish good early successional habitat?
- R In the past, we made small clear cuts – but that is not being discussed in these alternatives. Burning is the single best tool for helping many species.
- Q What about cover? Deer need cover at least as much as they need food. Are there adequate levels of cover for deer to feel comfortable in?
- R Oak woodlands would be scattered, with irregular edges. There would be a variety of habitat conditions. If 6% of the area (Oak woodlands) is to be burned overall, could burn 1% each year and have 6 stages.
- Q Would 6% be adequate area to maintain deer/turkey, with whatever fire regimen you apply?
- R With unlimited budget, we could do lots of things to help deer habitat. Prescribed open woodlands would help a lot.
- C The desired future conditions are long-term, but this EIS is a 5-year piece of work – what do we need to do right now to keep forest from falling apart. Key is loblolly pines of [a certain age range]. This EIS is just where we want to go and what we need to do first. Later, we'll look at the next most critical things.
- C If having lots of **wildlife** is important, let's have that be explicitly in part of the desired future conditions, rather than some incidental byproduct of other efforts.
- C I think we're jumping 25-30 years ahead of ourselves. We are supposed to look at desired future conditions and start with SPB areas to thin out. We can probably obtain

what we want by getting at what is already destroyed. We need to look, see what trees look like and start from there.

- Q This is a lot of information – probably too much. **What’s consistent among all the alternatives? What are the differences?**
- C Let’s list our interests and develop a matrix that gives us the right answer for DFCs. My interest is that loblolly is not indigenous and should go away. And, of course, don’t interfere with cultural and historical. Creating a matrix with interests and alternatives might help us get there.
- C This type of hardwood (closed canopy) has been eliminated in most of the rest of Alabama, but deer and turkey are all over the state. **Should we make provisions for deer and turkey here, too, or focus on developing closed canopy areas?** Ultimately, this initiative is about the long term.
- Q **For the next 5-10 years, will wildlife increase with these alternatives?**
- R Yes.
- D The presenters gave a brief **overview of how the alternatives would affect Areas 2 & 3.**
- Q **Could we take an Area 3 alternative and apply to Area 1?**
- R Any time we make “major, significant” change to an alternative, NEPA starts over – and we don’t have time for that.
- C These alternatives reflect the comments we received from public input and scoping. We can pick and choose among the alternatives – add and subtract, modify – but we cannot start all over at this point.

IV. CONCLUSION

- A The pie charts from the wildlife presentation will be posted on the Internet. Hard copies may

be made available at the ranger station and local library.

The meeting adjourned at 9:00 p.m.

- A Immediately following the meeting, the Steering Committee scheduled its next conference call for April 7 (4:00 p.m. CT).