

Done at Washington, DC, on; December 6, 1999.

F. Edward Scarbrough,
U.S. Manager for Codex.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Mississippi

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

SUMMARY: The Regional Forester for the Southern Region gives notice of the agency's intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for revision of the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the National Forests in Mississippi. According to 36 CFR 219.10(g), Forest Plans are ordinarily revised on a 10-15 year cycle. The existing Forest Plan for Mississippi was approved on September 16, 1985.

The agency invites written comments within the scope of the analysis described below. In addition, the agency gives notice that an open and full environmental analysis and decision making process (collaborative planning effort) will occur so that interested and affected citizens may participate and assist in identifying and developing recommendations on the management of the National Forests in Mississippi.

This Notice of Intent covers the following Mississippi counties which contain National Forest System lands: Adams, Amite, Benton, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Copiah, Forrest, Franklin, George, Greene, Harrison, Jackson, Jasper, Jefferson, Jones, Lafayette, Lincoln, Marshall, Newton, Oktibbeha, Pearl River, Perry, Pontotoc, Scott, Sharkey, Smith, Stone, Tippah, Union, Wayne, Wilkinson, Winston, and Yalobusha.

DATES: Comments concerning the scope of the analysis should be received on or before February 14, 2000. The agency expects to file the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) with the Environmental Protection Agency and make it available for public comment in September, 2001. The agency expects to file the final EIS in September, 2002. See Supplementary Information (Section VI. Involving the Public) for meeting dates.

ADDRESSES: Submit written comments to Forest Supervisor, National Forests in

Mississippi, 100 W. Capitol St., Suite 1141, Jackson, MS 39269.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Jeff Long, Land Management Planning Revision Team Leader, (601) 965-4391.

RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL: The Regional Forester for the Southern Region located at 1720 Peachtree Road, NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30367.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

I. Background

The National Forests in Mississippi Forest Plan covers the six proclaimed National Forests in Mississippi: Bienville, DeSoto, Delta, Holly Springs, Homochitto and Tombigbee. Pursuant to 36 CFR 219.10(g), the Forest Supervisor is required to review the conditions on the land covered by the Forest Plan at least every five years to determine whether conditions and/or demands of the public have changed significantly. This regulation further states that the Forest Plan may be revised whenever the Forest Supervisor determines that significant changes have occurred. In 1991, staff of the National Forests in Mississippi conducted a five-year review of the Forest Plan. The Forest Service completed a ten-year review in 1996 and annual reviews for fiscal years 1997 and 1998.

Concurrent with the ten-year review, the Forest's interdisciplinary Land Management Planning Team updated resource inventories, estimated supply capabilities and resource demands, and determined initial needs to change management direction. Together with the reviews and public comments solicited on its findings, this work forms the basis for the preliminary issues identified in this Notice of Intent. These preliminary issues along with any additional issues raised during public scoping activities, to begin in January 2000, will be examined during the plan revision process.

In the past, a "Notice of Intent to Prepare an Environmental Impact Statement" marked the very beginning of the planning process. For this plan revision, however, an effort was made to define the current situation and to present detailed proposed actions as part of this notice. We trust this will lead to improved "scoping" and provide more concise and specific public comments. These, in turn, will make it possible to develop more responsive alternatives for analysis in the Environmental Impact Statement. Our desired results are improve public participation opportunities facilitated by open decision making process throughout the Forest Plan revision process.

Two Stage Decision Making Process

National Forest System resource allocation and management decisions are made in two decision stages or steps. Programmatic (strategic) management decisions occur in the first stage and are documented in the Forest Plan. Programmatic decisions in the Forest Plan are implemented by authorization of site-specific activities. This project level decision-making is the second stage.

The first decision stage establishes programmatic management direction spanning a ten to fifteen year time span. A Forest Plan is analogous to a county or city zoning plan. Decisions made in the Forest Plan identify actions that may take place but do not represent a commitment by the agency to implement site-specific projects. Forest Plans do not compel the agency to undertake particular site-specific projects; rather, they establish overall goals and objectives (or desired resource conditions) that an individual National Forest will strive to achieve in order to maintain or assure ecological sustainability and to contribute to economic and social sustainability of local communities affected by national forest management activities. Forest Plan decisions do not normally make any irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources. Forest Plans also establish limitations on what actions may be authorized, and what conditions must be met during project decision-making.

The following decisions are made in a Forest Plan:

(1) Establishment of the forest-wide multiple-use goals and objectives (36 CFR 219.11(b)).

(2) Establishment of forest-wide management requirements (36 CFR 219.13 to 219.27).

(3) Establishment of multiple-use prescriptions and associated standards and guidelines for each management area (36 CFR 219.11(c)).

(4) Determination of land that is suitable for the production of timber (16 U.S.C. 1604(k) and 36 CFR 219.14).

(5) Establishment of allowable sale quantity for timber within a time frame specified in the plan (36 CFR 219.16).

(6) Establishment of monitoring and evaluation requirements (36 CFR 219.11(d)).

(7) Recommendation of roadless areas as potential wilderness areas (36 CFR 219.17).

(8) Where applicable, designation of those lands administratively available for oil and gas leasing; and when appropriate, authorizing the Bureau of Land Management to offer specific lands for leasing (36 CFR 228.102 (d) and (e)).

This Notice of Intent to prepare an environmental impact statement for revision of the National Forests in Mississippi Land and Resource Management Plan focuses on the strategic management decisions occurring in the first decision stage described above.

II. Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose for this revision rests primarily in the requirements of the National Forest Management Act. The law's implementing regulations at 36 CFR 219.10(g) require that Forest Plans be revised at least every 15 years. The current resource management plan for the National Forests in Mississippi was initiated in September 1985.

A need to revise the plan exists due to: changes in policy or law and changed physical, biological, and social conditions occurring on the forest.

Changes in Policy or Law

A substantial body of case law has developed, since the original Forest Plan was written. This case law more clearly defines the roles and requirements of a Forest Plan. One resulting example is the concise listing of eight forest-plan decisions listed in the previous section.

Similarly, the science and policy of national forest management have continued to evolve. Key examples include: service-wide adoption of Ecosystem Management in 1992, the "Course to the Future" strategy in 1994, the Southern Region's revised strategy for management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker in 1995, and Forest Service Natural Resource Agenda in 1998. These policy statements represent a fundamental change in management philosophy and, as such, are built from an extensive set of concepts and principles. These concepts include a focus on desired conditions, thinking and acting at multiple scales, working within the ecological potential of sites and landscapes, and an increasing emphasis on ecological sustainability.

Changed Physical, Biological, and Social Conditions

Hurricanes, tornadoes, ice storms, and Southern Pine Beetle outbreaks have made changes to the forest beyond those contemplated in the current plan. Beaver impoundments and the success of exotics such as kudzu and Cogongrass have made, or threaten, additional changes. In many areas, our neighbors and customers have changed significantly. Near the Mississippi Gulf Coast, private lands in and around the National Forests have become more densely populated. Adjacent landowner

expectations and values have shifted from a rural to a more urban perspective introducing a new set of issues and concerns to be addressed during Forest Plan revision. This urban interface phenomenon is occurring in varying degrees on all National Forests within the state.

III. Preliminary Issues

The following preliminary issues offered here were developed from: (1) The 10-year review of the current plan; (2) subsequent annual monitoring reports; (3) public and internal response to their findings; (4) from public comments received on project level proposals. Public comments in response to this notice will help us to determine additional issues and scope of the analysis to be considered.

Forest Health/Sustainability

Sustainable Forest Ecosystem Management is a key component of the Forest Service Natural Resource Agenda. Watersheds are vital to ecosystem health. Healthy watersheds promote healthy forests and sustainable forest ecosystems. The revised Forest Plan will incorporate Forest Service policy to restore and maintain healthy watersheds for use by current and future generations.

Forest Health and Sustainability issues include:

- Forest biological diversity.
- Native forest ecosystem restoration.
- Old growth.
- Forest health, especially protection from insects and diseases.
- Protection of riparian wetland areas.
- Streamside zone management.
- Control or eradication of noxious weeds occurring on National Forest lands.
- Management of special interest areas.

Vegetation Management

The harvest and regeneration of timber producing trees has always been a central issue in National Forest planning in Mississippi. Over the life of the current Forest Plan, timber has generally ranked as the second most valuable agricultural crop in the state of Mississippi. This issue assumes additional significance because of the effects of timber harvest on other resources such as recreation and wildlife. Not surprisingly, forest regeneration and timber harvest were the subject of more review comments than any others. Public comments received on the 10-year Review of the Land and Resource Management Plan expressed support for timber harvests to

continue at current or higher levels. Opposing views also have been expressed resulting in polarization of the issue. Individuals and organizations involved in the timber industry or local government have expressed concern about the decline of National Forest timber harvests on local economies, particularly on employment and the 25% returns to counties for roads and schools. The average actual timber volume sold on the National Forests in Mississippi were just over 80% of the amount planned for fiscal years 1985 through 1995. Declines in harvest levels have occurred over the last several years generating concern about declining revenues.

Vegetation Management issues identified and will focus on:

- Allowable sale quantity (ASQ).
- Lands suitable for timber production.
- Relationship of timber harvest levels to local economies and jobs.
- Silvicultural systems and how they affect sustainability and forest health.
- Uneven-aged silvicultural systems effect on timber and non-timber resources.
- Hardwood management within pine stands.
- Mixed pine management.
- Alternative forest products, such as pine straw raking and removal.
- Role of herbicide use in forest management.

Threatened, Endangered, Proposed and Sensitive Species Management

Red-cockaded Woodpecker Decisions. The *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and its Habitat on National Forests in the Southern Region* (RCW/EIS) was issued in June of 1995. The RCW/EIS contains direction to revise previous management practices, standards, and guidelines, and its Record of Decision (ROD) instructs affected Forests to incorporate the new direction into their Forest Plans, through revision or amendment.

The revised Forest Plan must establish final HMA boundaries and population objectives. The RCW/EIS Record of Decision established tentative HMA's on 367,169 acres on the Bienville, De Soto, Chickasawhay, and Homochitto Ranger Districts. The accompanying tentative population goal is 1,595 active clusters. As of 1996, the Forest's total number of active clusters was 134. Additionally, Forest Plan revision must incorporate the management practices, standards, and guidelines in the RCW Record of Decision. The HMA's and population

objectives are subject to some modification. Any changes will require analysis beyond the RCW/EIS as well as a favorable opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during formal consultation.

Other Threatened and Endangered Species. Management for other threatened, endangered, proposed, and sensitive species will also require consideration during plan revision. These species include: the gopher tortoise, and *Louisiana quillwort* occurring on the De Soto National Forest and the Pondberry on the Delta National Forest. Recovery plans for the affected species have been developed and their prescribed conservation and protection measures are incorporated in forest management activities. Forest Service will continue efforts to conserve and recover threatened, endangered, and sensitive species and their habitats.

Threatened, endangered, proposed, and sensitive species management issues to be addressed during plan revision include:

Develop management practices that promote viable populations of threatened, endangered, and sensitive species and their habitats occurring on National forest lands. Determine how much of the National Forests in Mississippi's land base will be allocated to red-cockaded woodpecker management (Habitat Management Areas) and what affect such allocation will have on other resource management opportunities.

Transportation and Access

Management of our forest transportation system attracts public scrutiny. Almost all users of the national forests use forest roads. Forest Service Natural Resource Agenda identifies forest roads as one of its key agenda items. Development of a national roads policy is underway. Once finalized revised Forest Plan will incorporate the national roads policy, as appropriate.

An extensive system of roads and trails allows access to nearly every part of the Forest. In addition, and by the direction of the current Forest Plan, the National Forests in Mississippi are "generally open to ORV's" (off-road vehicles), now more often referred to as OHV's (off-highway vehicles). Exceptions are individually identified areas of potential resource damage or conflict with other uses.

Motorized use can reduce the habitat quality for some wildlife species and cause damage to soils on sensitive sites. Use of motorized vehicles can also conflict with users who are seeking more solitude or can create safety

concerns for non-motorized users such as hikers or horseback riders. Motorized vehicle use, particularly that of all-terrain vehicles (ATV's), has increased dramatically over the last ten years. Furthermore, the current plan's assumption that cross-country travel by OHV's would be "limited by heavy undergrowth" has proven inaccurate. As a result, instances of resource damage and user conflicts have become increasingly common.

Transportation and access issues to be addressed during plan revision include:

Transportation management and access needs. The Forest's road system will be managed to meet resource needs and provide adequate public access.

Density of local roads required to provide permanent, effective access to National Forest lands for all resource management needs.

Off road vehicles (ORV's) management to provide recreational opportunities and protect other resources.

Recreation

National Forests in Mississippi offer a host of outdoor recreation opportunities. Recreation demand, both dispersed and developed, is expected to continue to increase over the next plan cycle. Increases in recreation use often create resource management conflicts. Different user groups compete for use of the same area, each having different expectations.

Prescribed Fire

Prescribed fire is an important management tool on the National Forests in Mississippi. Historically, fire played a significant role in shaping the native plant and animal communities in Mississippi. The Forest consistently ranks first or second in the nation in the amount of acreage on which it is applied. Beginning in the 1960's, prescribed burning has normally been conducted on upland pine sites, with site preparation burns occurring in late summer and understory burns during the dormant season. Prior to European settlement, fires occurred throughout the year on a variety of sites, whenever conditions allowed a natural or aboriginal ignitions to spread. Studies indicate that fire can have an influence on the successful regeneration of oaks. One of the concepts underlying ecosystem management is that natural processes should be simulated to the greatest extent possible. This builds on the idea that the structure and function of native ecosystems is best maintained by the conditions under which they evolved. To the extent that these conditions can be recreated on the Forest, it will

require changes to our traditional application of prescribed fire.

Prescribed fire issues to be addressed during plan revision include:

Determine role of prescribed fire in achieving forest ecosystem management goals and objectives.

Identify and evaluate the extent, time of year (including summer growing season), and frequencies for prescribed fire use as an ecosystem management tool.

Evaluate impacts associated with use of plow lines and establish appropriate standards and guidelines.

Consider use of permanent fire lines, especially within wildland/urban interface zones.

Roadless Areas

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for Roadless Area Review and Evaluation II (RARE II) of 1979 inventoried three roadless areas on National Forest lands in Mississippi. Two areas, Black Creek and Leaf, were recommended for wilderness designation. The third, Sandy Creek, was listed for further study. In 1984, the Mississippi National Forest Wilderness Act created the Black Creek Wilderness and the Leaf Wilderness. Included in the act was "release" language which directed that inventoried areas not designated as wilderness be managed for multiple use; however, the act also directed that the "wilderness option" be reviewed for such areas when the Forest Plan was revised. For the National Forests in Mississippi, the Sandy Creek area on the Homochitto National Forest is the only area in this category.

On October 13, President Clinton directed the USDA Forest Service to develop a proposal potentially affecting over 40 million acres on inventoried roadless areas on national forests and grasslands. The 2,375 acre Sandy Creek RARE II Further Study Area is the only area in Mississippi meeting the President's initial criteria for review consideration. On October 25, 1999, forest Service Chief Dombeck issued a notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement as the first step towards implementing President Clinton's direction to further protect remaining roadless areas within National Forest System lands. The Sandy Creek Further Study Area will be evaluated as part of the national roadless area review. A draft environmental impact statement on the roadless area is expected to be available for public review in the spring 2000. Recommendations specific to the Sandy Creek Further Study Area that may follow from the national review will be incorporated during plan revision.

IV. Proposed Action

The Southern Regional Forester proposes to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for revising the Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the National Forests in Mississippi. The Forest Plan will prescribe resource management direction pursuant to the requirements of the National Forest Management Act for the six proclaimed National Forests in Mississippi; Bienville, Delta, DeSoto, Homochitto, Holly Springs and Tombigbee National Forests. The agency invites the public, state and local government officials and their representatives, other federal agencies, and any affected Indian tribes to participate in the forest plan revision process which will proceed over the next 24 to 26 months before a final revised Forest Plan is issued.

The current Forest Plan for the National Forests in Mississippi requires revision to incorporate agency established ecosystem management principles. The Forest Service will identify ecological units through the LandType Association (LTA) level, according to the Forest Service National Hierarchical Framework of Ecological Units. Management direction in the revised Forest Plan would work toward maintaining the long-term ecological structure and function of affected ecosystems.

The current Forest Plan contains limited descriptions of desired future conditions (DFCs). The current plan's DFCs need updating to accurately reflect evolving agency and public expectations regarding resource uses, products, values or services occurring on or generated from national forest administered lands. One of the more critical tasks to be accomplished during the forest plan revision process will be development of updated DFCs. An open, public, collaborative planning process will be followed during development of DFCs.

Desired Future Conditions (DFCs) are descriptive statements expressing the collective vision of future landscape conditions and the uses, products, values, and services that will be provided. Desired future conditions and the outcomes associated with it will serve as the central reference point for planning and management of National Forest lands. DFC's will be developed in response to key issues identified during plan revision. Extensive public involvement (participation) will be sought as the forest identifies and develops DFC's during the plan revision process. Each DFC will utilize established ecological units as a criteria

for defining their location and capabilities. Each DFC will emphasize the resource or condition which the issue addresses. Plan revision alternatives will be developed by allocating land areas to individual DFC's in varying amounts. Notwithstanding the issue to which it responds, each DFC will consider all resource elements (incorporate multiple-use resource management principals). The allocation of the DFC's in each alternative will be distinctly mappable.

The following proposals specifically address the preliminary issues listed previously. Based on current information, they represent the Forest Service's initial choice of action for addressing these preliminary issues. The following proposed actions are identified at this time in an effort to provide focus for public review and comment and do not represent a final decision regarding the preliminary issues identified. All actions are subject to change as a result of scoping, developing alternatives, and conducting a more detailed analysis of effects.

Forest Health/Sustainability

Sustainable Forest Ecosystem Management is a key component of the Forest Service Natural Resource Agenda. Throughout the plan revision process the Forest Service will encourage all parties interested in resource management to collaborate in describing and defining sustainable forest management. During plan revision, focus will be placed on forest ecosystem health, agency accountability, and community partnerships to achieve Forest Service Natural Resource Agenda goals for sustainable forest ecosystem management. Management for health watersheds will be included as a key component in the development of Desired Future Condition statements. The revised plan will incorporate the Natural Resource Agenda goals and objectives for watershed protection and restoration. Management emphasis will be placed on watershed restoration and maintenance. During plan revision the Forest Service will: (1) Study the relationship between land uses, watersheds, and ecosystem health; (2) complete an ecosystem analyses at the watershed level to determine existing conditions and potential landscape capability; (3) use results from sound scientific analyses to make land use allocations and guide project-level decisions and set priorities for watershed restoration; (4) ensure that land management decisions meet watershed and ecosystem management

objectives; (5) collaborate with all interested parties and stakeholders to achieve health watersheds and ecosystems for current and future generations.

Vegetation Management

Vegetation management objectives will be developed as one of the DFC's for allocation. The Forest will employ both even-aged forest management, including clearcutting, and uneven-aged management as tools for achieving desired future conditions in appropriate ecological units and communities. Area regulation will be utilized for all even-aged management. Uneven-aged management will be regulated by diameter distribution with intermediate practices for developing uneven-aged structure in currently even-aged stands.

Old Growth. Management for old growth attributes will be included as one of the DFC's for allocation. The revised plan will consider old growth representation across the range of native forest communities.

Natural Disturbances. As much as practical, historical levels of disturbance will be incorporated into the revised plan's output predictions. General control and/or recovery guidelines will also be developed, both Forest-wide and for each management area.

Exotic Species. Mitigation measures and management practices designed to limit the spread of Cogongrass as well as kudzu control will be developed during plan revision. The revised plan will reflect the natural Resource Agenda emphases placed on control of exotic species to restore and enhance ecosystems.

Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive Species Management

Management emphasis will be placed on the conservation and recovery of threatened, endangered, and (federally listed) sensitive species and their habitats that occur on National Forest administered lands.

Red-Cockaded Woodpecker Decisions. The tentative Habitat Management Area (HMA) delineations from the Final RCW/EIS will be adopted, with only minor changes, on the Bienville, Chickasawhay, and Homochitto Ranger Districts. On the De Soto Ranger District, the boundaries for the Biloxi HMA will be adopted from the Final, but the two areas of the Black Creek HMA will be combined and moved to the Leaf River Wildlife Management Area. Revised population objectives will be developed for each of the above HMA's consistent with the proposed direction in Appendix "A" of the RCW/EIS Record of Decision (ROD). The

resulting forest-wide population objective is expected to total approximately 1,480 clusters. The revised Forest Plan will incorporate the standards and guidelines from the ROD, except that both the Chicawasaway and Bienville HMA's will be managed under the sub-HMA strategy. This is consistent with RCW/EIS direction for the Chicawasaway but represents a departure for the Bienville. Proposed changes in the sub-HMA strategy will require analysis beyond the RCW/EIS as well as a favorable opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reached through formal consultation. The Forest Plan will adopt the southern pine beetle high hazard rotation lengths where applicable.

Transportation and Access

Local road and OHV management will be included as an element of DFC's. For each desired future condition, OHV travel may be allowed area-wide, confined to designated areas, trails, or seasons, or prohibited entirely. Forest-wide, all areas will be closed to OHVs except those identified for their use.

A National Roads Policy is currently under development. When the roads policy is issued, agency direction will be incorporated during plan revision as appropriate.

Recreation

Recreation management is a priority item of the Forest Service natural Resource Agenda. Forest Service will seek to provide a diverse spectrum of recreation opportunities in response to changing demands.

The revised plan will incorporate the new recreation agenda of the Forest Service Natural Resource Agenda. The new recreation agenda concentrates on five key areas: (1) Improving the settings for outdoor recreation and enhancing visitor experiences, (2) guaranteeing visitor satisfaction with our services and facilities, (3) reaching out to rural and urban communities to capitalize on the social and economic opportunities associated with recreation on national forests, (4) strengthening our relationships with those who cooperate with us to improve outdoor recreation for all Americans, and (5) ensuring that recreation use does not impair the land's health.

Prescribed Fire

Fire return interval will be included as an element of Desired Future Conditions, and both dormant and growing season fire will be utilized. The use of prescribed fire for silvicultural objectives will be employed on hardwood sites where appropriate and

consistent with the Southern Region's Vegetation Management EIS, including the Delta National Forest.

Roadless Areas

The Sandy Creek Further Study Area will be evaluated as part of the national roadless area review. A draft environmental impact statement on the roadless area is expected to be available for public review in the spring 2000. Recommendations specific to the Sandy Creek Further study Area that may follow from the national review will be incorporated during plan revision. No other recommendations to the roadless area inventory are currently proposed. The revised plan will continue the management direction and practices adopted in the 1993 "Limits of Acceptable Change" process for the Black Creek and Leaf Wildernesses and the Black Creek scenic corridor.

V. Development of Alternatives

The alternatives presented in the Forest's DEIS will portray a full range of responses to key issues. The range of alternatives will include one that continues current management direction, as well as others that address the range of issues developed during the scoping process. The DEIS will examine the effects of implementing strategies to achieve different overall desired future conditions for the Forest, including possible management practices and objectives that move the Forest toward desired conditions. A preferred alternative will be identified in the DEIS.

VI. Involving the Public

The objective for public involvement in this process is to create an atmosphere of openness where all members of the public feel free to share information with the Forest Service and its employees on a regular basis. We seek to establish two-way communication with the public to gather ideas and concerns and to determine public attitudes. We seek to encourage public involvement in a planning process that fully integrates the needs and values of all segments of the public, including low-income, minority, and historically underserved communities.

The Forest Service is seeking information, comments, and assistance from Federal, State, and local agencies, Indian tribes, and other individuals or organizations who may be interested in or affected by the land management decisions under consideration during the plan revision process. This input will be used in the preparation of the DEIS. The range of alternatives to be

considered in the DEIS will be based on the identification of key public issues, management concerns, resource management opportunities, and plan decisions specific to the National Forests in Mississippi. Public participation will be solicited by notifying in person and/or by mail, interested publics. News releases will be used to give the public general notice, and public scoping meetings will be conducted on each Ranger District.

Public participation, facilitated by open decision making process, will be sought throughout the plan revision process and will be especially important at several points along the way. The first opportunity to comment will be during the scoping process (40 CFR 1501.7). Scoping includes: (1) Identifying additional potential issues (other than those previously described), (2) from these, identifying key issues or those which have been covered by prior environmental review, (3) exploring additional alternatives, and (4) identifying potential environmental effects of the proposed action and alternatives (i.e., direct, indirect, and cumulative effects).

As part of the first step in scoping, a series of public meetings are scheduled to explain the public's role in the planning process and provide an opportunity for public input. These meetings are planned as follows:

Bienville National Forest

January 18, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Forest Center in Forest, MS

January 20, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Raleigh Multi-Purpose Building In Raleigh, MS

January 22, 2000 from 10 am to 8 pm at the Benita Lakes Mall in Meridian, MS (Co-hosted with the Chicawasaway Ranger District)

January 25, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Morton City Auditorium in Morton, MS

Chicawasaway Ranger District

January 20, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Library of Hattiesburg, 329 Hardy Street, in Hattiesburg, MS (Co-hosted with the DeSoto Ranger District)

January 22, 2000 from 10 am to 3 pm at the Benita Lakes Mall in Meridian, MS (Co-hosted with the Bienville Ranger District)

January 24, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Chicawasaway Ranger District Office, 968 Highway 15 South, in Laurel, MS

January 27, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Waynesboro City Auditorium in Waynesboro, MS

Delta National Forest

January 18, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Community Center in Rolling Fork, MS

January 25, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Greenville Library in Greenville, MS

January 31, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Vicksburg Library in Vicksburg, MS

DeSoto Ranger District

January 20, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Library of Hattiesburg, 329 Hardy Street, in Hattiesburg, MS (Co-Hosted by the Chickasawhay Ranger District)

January 21, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Orange Grove Community Center on Highway 49, North in Gulfport, MS

January 25, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the DeSoto Ranger District Office, 654 W. Frontage Road, in Wiggins, MS

Holly Springs National Forest

January 10, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Holly Springs District Office, 1000 Front Street, Oxford, MS

January 18, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Marshall County Industrial Development Authority, 520 Access Road, Holly Springs, MS

January 24, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Corps of Engineers Building, Scenic Route 333, Grenada Dam Road, Grenada, MS

Homochitto National Forest

January 20, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Agriculture Building, at Alcorn State University, in Lorman, MS

January 25, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Homochitto District Office in Gloster, MS

January 27, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Meadville Public Library in Meadville, MS

Tombigbee National Forest

January 11, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm Tombigbee District Office in Ackerman, MS

January 12, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Thompson Hall on the campus of Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS

January 18, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Fire Department in Houston, MS

January 25, 2000 from 3 pm to 8 pm at the Lake Tiak O'Kata in Louisville, MS

National Forests in Mississippi (Forest-wide emphasis)

January 11, 2000 from 10 am to 8 pm at the McCoy Federal Building, 100 West Capitol Street, Jackson, MS

Additional public meetings will be scheduled throughout the plan revision process. Their location and frequency of

occurrence will vary depending upon specific objectives. The primary objective for the initial meetings listed above are for information sharing and initial identification of additional public issues and concerns. Subsequent public meetings may focus on specific key issues to seek clarification and understanding prior to development of alternatives and evaluation of effects. Public notice will be provided through publication in the newspaper, the Clariton-Ledger, published daily in Jackson, Mississippi. Notice will also be served through direct mailings to interested and affected parties identified during the plan revision process. The Forest Service will seek to identify other methods to effectively accomplish outreach and invite and encourage broad public involvement throughout the Forest Plan revision process.

The DEIS is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to be available for public review by September, 2001. At that time, EPA will publish a notice of availability of the draft supplement in the **Federal Register**. The comment period for the DEIS will be 3 months from the date the EPA's notice of availability appears in the **Federal Register**.

After the comment period ends on the DEIS, the comments will be analyzed, considered, and responded to by the Forest Service in preparing the FEIS. The Forest Service will continue to open decision making (collaborative efforts) during the evaluation of comments received on the DEIS. The FEIS is scheduled to be completed by September, 2001. The responsible official will consider the comments, responses, environmental consequences discussed in the final environmental impact statement, and applicable laws, regulations, and policies in making a decision regarding this proposal. The responsible official will document the decision and reasons for the decision in a Record of Decision. The decision will be subject to appeal in accordance with 36 CFR part 217.

The responsible official is Elizabeth Estill, Regional Forester, Southern Region, 1720 Peachtree Road, NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30367.

Dated: December 8, 1999.

David G. Holland,

Deputy Regional Forester for Natural Resources.

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**Forest Service****Mill Creek Timber Sales and Related Activities, Rogue River National Forest Jackson County, OR**

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The USDA, Forest Service (USFS), will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS). The purpose of the EIS is to analyze and disclose the environmental impacts of a site specific proposal to commercially harvest and regenerate trees, construct, reconstruct, and decommission roads, implement vegetation density management activities, implement wildlife projects, and conduct prescribed burns. The activities are proposed in the Upper Rogue River watershed located on lands administered by the Rogue River National Forest, on the Prospect Ranger District, within Jackson County, Oregon. The Proposed Action will tier to and be designed under the Rogue River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1990), as amended by the Record of Decision for the Northwest Forest Plan (1994), which provides guidance for land management activities. This proposal is scheduled for implementation during fiscal Years 2000-2003. The Prospect Ranger District invites written comments concerning the scope of the analysis in addition to those comments that will be solicited as a result of local public participation activities. The Forest Service will also give notice of the full environmental analysis and decision making process so that interested and affected people are made aware as to how they may participate and contribute to the final decision.

DATES: Issues and comments concerning the scope, implementation, and analysis of the Proposed Action must be received by January 5, 2000.

ADDRESSES: Submit written comments regarding the Proposed Action to Joel King, District Ranger, Prospect Ranger District, 47201 Highway 62, Prospect, Oregon, 97536.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Direct questions about the Proposed Action and EIS to Don Boucher, Interdisciplinary Team Leader, Prospect Ranger District, 47201 Highway 62, Prospect, Oregon, 97536, phone: 541-560-3400, FAX: 541-560-3444, e-mail: dboucher/r6pnw_rogueiver@fs.ded.us.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Mill Creek Timber Sales and Related