

Chapter 1 – Purpose and Need for Action

Introduction

The Monongahela National Forest is preparing this Environmental Assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations. This EA discloses direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action and alternatives. This document is organized into four chapters.

Chapter 1- Purpose and Need for Action: This chapter includes information on the history of the project proposal, the purpose and need for the project, and the agency's proposal for achieving that purpose and need.

Chapter 2- Alternatives Considered: This chapter details how the Forest Service informed the public of the proposal and how the public responded. It also provides a more detailed description of the agency's proposed actions as well as the alternative methods for achieving the stated purpose. These alternatives were developed based on issues raised by the public and other agencies. A summary table of the proposed projects associated with each alternative is provided.

Chapter 3- Environmental Effects: This chapter describes the existing conditions and the environmental effects of implementing the proposed actions and other alternatives.

Chapter 4- Project Consultation and Coordination: This chapter provides a list of preparers and Federal and State agencies consulted during the development of the EA. It also identifies those from the public who provided comments during the analysis process.

Additional documentation, including detailed analyses of the project area resources, may be found in the project planning record located at the Gauley Ranger District Office in Richwood, WV.

Project Area Description

The Cherry River project area includes an estimated 6381 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands and an estimated 2993 acres of privately owned lands, totaling 9374 acres. It adjoins the communities of Richwood and Holcomb, in Nicholas County (see Map 1, pp. 1-2).

The entire project area lies within Compartments 48, 61, 62 and 63 on the Gauley Ranger District. The Cherry River forms the southern boundary, with state routes 94/5 and 7/3 forming the approximate northern boundary. The project area extends from the mouth of the Cherry River east to Joes's Branch of the North Fork Cherry. Elevations range from about 1900' at the mouth of Cherry, to about 3,260'.

Most of the project area is within the Lower Cherry Composite watershed and makes up about 4% of that 6th order watershed.

Approximately 68% of the project area is managed under the National Forest System, while 32% is privately held. National forest lands adjoin the project area to the North, but the rest of the project area is almost completely surrounded by private lands. There are two in-holdings, or areas of private land surrounded by National Forest ownership.

Public use of the area along with access to private land is facilitated by open state or county roads. Although there are no National Forest trails in the vicinity, the Tri-Rivers Rail Trail, on private land, is managed for public use. There are no forest system roads open for vehicle travel. The Mountain Waters Scenic Byway Extension travels along part of the southern edge of the project area.

See Appendix B for project maps, including a compartment and stand map, to facilitate reference to project activities.

Forest Plan Direction

The Monongahela National Forest began implementing its Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) in July 1986. The Forest Plan, and accompanying Final Environmental Impact Statement, and Record of Decision specify the overall direction for managing all resources for the Forest, and consist of Forest-wide and area-specific goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines that provide for land uses with anticipated resource outputs.

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) established requirements for site-specific planning, such as this EA. This EA documents the site-specific analysis of implementing the Forest Plan in the Cherry River project area.

Under the Forest Plan, the Forest is divided into planning areas, referred to as Opportunity Areas (OAs). Management prescriptions (MPs) are assigned to lands within each OA. Each MP has its own purpose, area description, desired future condition, and set of standards and guidelines for management. The Cherry River project area includes two Opportunity Areas in MP 3.0, the Holcomb (3.005) and Cherry River (3.006) OAs. Only the area in these OAs within the Cherry River watershed will be considered at this time.

The Cherry River project area is designated as Management Prescription (MP) 3.0 in the Monongahela Forest Plan. The desired future condition of the area is described as a “Forest that will be a mosaic of stands of predominantly hardwood trees...that provide habitat for a variety of wildlife species. The stands will vary in size, shape, height, and species...” (Forest Plan, p 127). In order to achieve this desired condition, the Forest Plan identifies the emphasis for this area as:

- Large, high quality hardwood trees for lumber and veneer, hard mast production and scenic attributes; and
- Wildlife species tolerant of disturbances, such as deer, grouse and squirrel.

Purpose and Need for Action

The proposed action was developed through an assessment of current conditions in the project area in relation to the desired future condition described in the Monongahela Forest Plan (Forest Plan, pp. 127-128). The proposed action was identified to move the existing condition of the project area towards the desired condition outlined for MP 3.0 areas of the Forest Plan.

Purpose and Need for Action

The purpose and need for action in the Cherry River project is to:

- create young forest habitat and permanent openings within the area to improve habitat for species such as grouse, deer, and squirrel;
- develop age class diversity across the project area in order to ensure large, high quality hardwoods trees are growing across the watershed so that a sustainable amount of mast is provided for wildlife species and forest products are available over time; and
- reduce the amount of competition between trees for light and water resources in dense, over-crowded stands to decrease the risk of insect and disease infestation.

Young forests, also referred to as early successional forests, and maintained permanent openings provide important habitat for species such as deer, grouse and squirrel. The Forest Plan states that 10-20% of the area should be in the younger age classes (seedling/sapling). The project area currently contains an estimated 3% of the forest stands in the younger seedling/sapling age class.

The goal for permanent openings is 5%. The western part of the project area currently contains 4% in permanent openings, including private lands. Young forest habitat and permanent openings are lacking in the area and there is a need to create this type of habitat.

Fruits and nuts from trees provide forage for wildlife species and are referred to as mast. As trees age, their mast production decreases. The Forest plan states that 50-75% of the area should be in the older age classes, also referred to as sawtimber (Forest Plan, p 129). An estimated 92% of the forest stands within the Cherry River project area are in the older sawtimber condition. There is a need to create more age class diversity across the project area in order to create large, high quality hardwood trees over time so that mast is sustained across the area and so that forest products are available over time.

Many stands within the project area are composed of extremely dense or crowded trees. These conditions result in reduced growth from water and nutrient competition. This competition stresses the trees which then become more susceptible to insect and disease infestation. One of the Forest Plan standards related to this situation is “Management techniques and practices should be stressed which prevent unacceptable Forest pest damage from developing.” (Forest Plan, p. 92)

Road construction and reconstruction would be needed in order to provide access for present and future vegetation and habitat management.

Table 1-1: Size Class Distribution in the Cherry River Project Area.

Size Class Description	Forest Plan Goals (% of Area)	Existing Condition* (% of Area)
Permanent Openings	5	0.3
Seedling/Sapling	10-20	2.5
Pole Timber	15-30	4.5
Saw timber	50-75	92.7

*Figures in this table are approximations.

Proposed Action

The proposed action for the project area focuses on vegetation management to meet the purpose and need described above.

The Forest Service is proposing to harvest a total of 198 acres in 13 separate units to create younger stands of trees, commercially thin about 1,589 acres to reduce stand density, and harvest and seed a total of 6 acres in three separate locations to create wildlife openings within the Cherry River watershed in the vicinity of Holcomb.

Specific activities proposed are:

- Commercial thinning of 1,589 acres using helicopter and conventional skidding
- Clearcut harvest 204 acres within the planning area (includes wildlife openings);
- Pre-treat areas to be regenerated by cutting vines, and post-treat by cutting non-commercial trees that might impede regeneration;
- Plant six acres of openings with grasses, forbs, shrubs and apple or chestnut trees;
- Construct approximately 6 3/4 miles of new road; reconstruct approximately 2 1/2 miles of woods roads; and cooperate with the DOH on maintenance of state roads.

Scope of the Environmental Analysis

National forest planning takes place at several levels: national, regional, forest, and project levels. The Cherry River EA is a project-level analysis; its scope is confined to addressing the purpose and need of the project, possible environmental consequences of the proposal, and alternatives. It does not attempt to address decisions made at higher levels. It does, however, implement direction provided at higher levels.

The Forest Plan embodies the provisions of the National Forest Management Act, its implementing regulations, and other guiding documents. The Forest Plan sets forth in detail the direction for managing the land and resources of the Monongahela National Forest. Where appropriate, the Cherry River EA tiers to the Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) (40 CFR 1502.20).

This EA evaluates and documents the effects caused by the proposed activities and various alternatives. The site-specific proposed action and alternatives to it are identified in Chapter 2.

The administrative scope of this document can be defined as the laws and regulations that provide the framework for analysis.

Decisions to be Made

The responsible official for the decision will be the Monongahela National Forest Supervisor. The responsible official will answer the following three questions based on the environmental analysis:

- Will the proposed action proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative, or not at all?

If it proceeds:

- What mitigation measures and monitoring requirements will be implemented?

- Will the project require a Forest Plan amendment, or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)?

Applicable Laws and Executive Orders

Shown below is a partial list of federal laws and executive orders pertaining to project-specific planning and environmental analysis on Federal lands.

- Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960
- National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (as amended)
- Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, amended 1986
- National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (as amended)
- Clean Air Act of 1977 (as amended)
- Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 (as amended)
- Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA) of 1974 (as amended)
- National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 (as amended)
- Clean Water Act of 1977 (as amended)
- American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978
- Archeological Resource Protection Act of 1979
- Cave Resource Protection Act of 1988
- Executive Order 11593 (cultural resources)
- Executive Order 11988 (floodplains)
- Executive Order 11990 (wetlands)
- Executive Order 12898 (environmental justice)
- Executive Order 12962 (aquatic systems and recreational fisheries)