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Environmental Assessment

Middle Mountain Wildlife Savannah Project

**Marlinton Ranger District, Monongahela National Forest
Pocahontas County, West Virginia**

For Information Contact: O'Dell E. Tucker
Monongahela National Forest
1103 Cemetery Rd.
Marlinton, WV 24954
304-799-4334, ext. 19
otucker@fs.fed.us

Chapter 1. Purpose and Need for Action

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Monongahela National Forest (MNF), Marlinton/White Sulphur Ranger District, proposes to enhance wildlife habitat on Middle Mountain by creating wildlife savannahs. Savannahs would provide remote, early seral herbaceous habitat in an area that is currently lacking habitat for wild turkey and other species that benefit from savannahs.

The Forest Service plans to use Stewardship End Results Contracting, a new tool available to accomplish multiple land management projects by combining them into a products-for-service contract or agreement. Stewardship projects are developed in a collaborative manner with local governments and agencies, communities, and any other interested groups or individuals. Receipts gained from harvesting forest products are used to offset the cost of other resource improvement components of the project.

This chapter: 1) describes the site-specific proposal, referred to as the “proposed action”, 2) explains why the proposed action is needed, 3) defines the scope of the analysis, and 4) lists the decisions to be made with this project.

1.2 PROJECT AREA DESCRIPTION

Middle Mountain lies within the Douthat Creek Opportunity Area, which contains about 6,800 acres of National Forest System (NFS) lands and 800 acres of private land. The 486-acre project area is located within Anthony Creek and Knapp Creek watersheds, about 10 miles south of Minnehaha Springs, West Virginia in Pocahontas County. The savannahs are proposed along the Middle Mountain Trail (Trail #408). The project area is accessed via Forest Road 790, a designated Class Q Permit road.

The project area is split into a northern and southern section, along Trail 408. The northern section is approximately 364 acres, occupies land between Douthat Creek on the west and FR962 on the east, and lies within small portions of both the Douthat Creek watershed that falls within Knapp Creek. The southern section is approximately 122 acres and occupies land between Forest 790 and the Middle Mountain Ridgetop. This section lies primarily within the Douthat Creek Watershed, with 15 acres of it in the Anthony Creek Watershed (see attached map 1-1).

1.3 FOREST PLAN DIRECTION

The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) established requirements for programmatic planning, such as the Monongahela National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (USDA 1986, Forest Plan), and site-specific planning, such as this Environmental Assessment (EA).

The Monongahela National Forest began implementation of its 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 of the resources for the Forest, and consists of both Forest-wide and area-specific goals, standards, and guidelines that provide for land uses with anticipated resource outputs.

This EA documents the site-specific analysis of implementing the Forest Plan in the Middle Mountain Savannah project area.

1.3.1 Management Prescription Direction

Under the Monongahela 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 management prescription has its own purpose, area description, desired future condition, and set of standards and guidelines for management.

The 486-acre Middle Mountain Wildlife Savannah Project Area (hereafter referred to as the project area) includes portions of two OAs (Douthat Creek, OA 46.118 and Upper Middle Mountain, OA 66.262). The management prescriptions assigned to these OAs include 471 acres of MP 6.1 and 15 acres of MP 6.2 (see attached Map 1-2).

The primary purpose of MP 6.1 is to emphasize remote habitat for species intolerant of disturbance. The secondary purposes are to manage for: 1) a semi-primitive non-motorized type of recreational environment; 2) a mix of forest products; 3) a strategy for management of sites reverting from hardwood to conifer (pine and spruce) and the intermingled high site hardwood types (Forest Plan, pg. 164).

The primary purposes of MP 6.2 are to: 1) emphasize a semi-primitive, non-motorized setting with opportunity for a variety of dispersed recreation activities; 2) a largely natural, undisturbed environment. The secondary purposes are to manage for: 1) wildlife habitat for species requiring a low level of disturbance; 2) protection of watersheds and soils (Forest Plan, pg. 183).

1.4 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

The purpose and need for action explains why the proposed action is needed. It was developed through an assessment of the current conditions of the project area in relation to the desired future condition described in the Monongahela Forest Plan. This proposal and analysis would focus on the recommendations related to the mosaic of forest stands and openings.

1.4.1 Mosaic of Forested Stands and Openings

For MP 6.1, the Forest Plan does not identify specific percentages but does identify the desired future condition of the forest as “a mosaic of trees stands and opening with a near optimum quantity and dispersions of the habitat elements that feature the wild turkey and black bear along

with associated wildlife species. Management emphasis would focus on manipulation of the naturally occurring tree species composition to optimize hard mast production, age class distribution, and ensure a continuous supply of mast” (Forest Plan, p. 165).

From the 1880s through the early 1900s, extensive timber harvesting occurred across the state. Construction of railroads doubled in the 1880s and then doubled again in the 1890s, allowing access to and transportation of the timber resource (Lewis, 1998). As a result, much of what is now the Monongahela National Forest had been clearcut by the late 1920s, including the Middle Mountain Savannah area. For this reason, much of the Middle Mountain Savannah watershed consists of closed-canopy even-aged forest, with over 76% of the forested stands overall between 60 and 100 years old. Many of the older trees are competing for nutrients resulting in slower growth and susceptibility to insects and disease.

There is a need to:

- provide remote, early seral habitat in Middle Mountain for wild turkey and black bear along with other associated wildlife species.

1.5 PROPOSED ACTION

The Forest Service proposes to improve wildlife habitat diversity within the project area by creating early seral stands in the form of savannahs. Specifically, the proposed action includes:

1.5.1 Mosaic of Forest Stands and Openings

The proposed action would create five savannah units, totaling about 27 acres. Commercial timber harvests would be used to reduce stand densities in these units by 2/3rds. Hard mast trees such as oak and shagbark hickory greater than 13 inches diameter would be left within the savannah units. Other leave trees would include snags, cull/den trees, and small diameter soft mast trees in clumps (e.g., dogwood, serviceberry, etc.). Stumps would be removed and debris would be piled. Native grasses and forbs would be planted within the savannahs to create the desired mix of hiding cover and foraging opportunity. Water sources would be provided for wildlife close to the savannahs, by restoring one existing water holes and creating one new water hole.

About 82 acres surrounding the savannah units would receive an intermediate harvest treatment (thinning). About 486 acres (savannahs, thinned areas and adjacent lands) would receive a prescribed burn treatment every 3 to 5 years to maintain the savannahs as grassy openings and retain the surrounding stands in mixed oak and oak-pine forest types.

1.6 SCOPE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

National forest planning takes place at several levels: national, regional, forest, and project levels. The Middle Mountain Savannah EA is a project-level analysis; its scope is confined to addressing the significant issues and possible environmental consequences of the project. It does not attempt to address decisions made at those higher levels. It does, however, implement direction provided at those 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 Middle Mountain Savannah EA tiers to the 1986 Forest Plan FEIS, as encouraged by 40 CFR 1502.20.

The scope of the analysis addressed in this EA is limited to the issues and effects specific to the creation of savannahs, for wildlife habitat in Middle Mountain. This EA documents and evaluates the effects caused by the proposed activities and various alternatives. These site-specific proposed actions 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.

1.7 DECISIONS TO BE MADE

The responsible official for the decision is the Marlinton/White Sulphur District Ranger. The responsible official will answer the following questions based on the environmental analysis:

1. Will the proposed action proceed as proposed, as modified by an alternative, or not at all?
If it proceeds:
2. What mitigation measures and monitoring requirements will the Forest Service implement?
3. Will the project require a Forest Plan amendment?

1.8 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. While most pertain to all federal lands, some of the laws are specific to West Virginia. Disclosures and findings by state laws are contained in Chapter 3 of this EA.

Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act

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 1955 (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 1980

Cave Resource Protection Act of 1988

Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918

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)