

# Decision Memo

## Upper Williams Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project

USDA Forest Service – Monongahela National Forest  
Marlinton Ranger District  
Pocahontas County, West Virginia

### 1. Decision

I have decided to approve the Upper Williams Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project. All project work will occur on National Forest System lands. Following is a complete description of activities included in my decision:

- **Aspen Stand Improvement:** Improve aspen stand reproduction by girdling trees on 1.1 acres in the stand identified in Table 1 below.
- **Songbird Habitat Improvement:** Improve songbird habitat by girdling trees on 78 acres in the two stands identified in Table 1 below.
- **Snowshoe Hare Habitat Improvement:** Improve snowshoe hare habitat by girdling trees on 6 acres in the three stands identified in Table 1 below.
- **Indiana Bat Habitat Improvement:** Improve Indiana Bat habitat on 586 acres by girdling trees in the 16 stands identified in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Wildlife Habitat Improvement Projects**

Activity	Compartment	Stand	Acres
Aspen Stand Improvement	17	51	1.1
Songbird Habitat Improvement	29	16	19
	29	17	59
Snowshoe Hare Habitat Improvement	27	1	2
	27	12	2
	28	10	2
Indiana Bat Habitat Improvement	26	44	81.5
	26	45	68.6
	26	48	63.6
	26	51	29.3
	26	43	13
	28	83	11.3
	28	73	14.2
	28	11	29.1
	28	59	44.3
	28	37	28.2
	28	56	22.6
	28	50	67.7
	28	22	13.1
	28	78	26.3
	28	25	19.8
	29	9	53

With each of these treatments, the goal is to have an average of 6-10 snags per acre in the treatment areas, so the number of trees girdled will vary depending on the number of snags already existing in a given area. Where practical, a certified timber marker will be involved in tree girdling efforts to aid proper tree species identification. Trees will not be girdled within a tree length of any system road or trail to avoid increased snags/downfall along these travel corridors. Trees also will not be girdled within a tree length of private property boundaries.

## **REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION**

I have concluded that this decision is appropriately categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment consistent with Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 section 31.2 (6): “Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service level D, FSH 7709.56).” There are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment (see documentation in the project file).

- This project will not affect any federally endangered or threatened species and will not likely cause a listing or loss of viability to any forest sensitive species. A biological evaluation was completed and is available in the project file, along with concurrence from USDI-Fish and Wildlife Service.
- No municipal watersheds will be affected by this project. The action will not adversely affect the character of floodplains or wetlands.
- This project is not located within or near any congressionally designated areas such as Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, and National Recreation Areas. Also, there are no inventoried Roadless Areas or Research Natural Areas, and therefore will not affect these resources.
- The action will not impact American Indians and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites and no archeological sites or historic resources. No known historic or prehistoric sites which are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by this project.

## **2. Purpose and Need**

The purpose of this project is to improve vegetative diversity and wildlife habitat conditions, including habitat for federally listed species and species of concern, and to improve aspen regeneration, all actions that will contribute to the goals of the 2006 National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, referred to as the Forest Plan. The project area falls within Management Prescriptions (MP) 3.0 – Vegetation Diversity, 4.1 - Spruce and Spruce-Hardwood Restoration, and 6.1 – Wildlife Habitat Emphasis. The activities are compatible with direction for these MP’s and will contribute toward achieving their stated wildlife habitat goals and objectives.

**Aspen Stand Improvement** - Aspen provides food for grouse, purple finch, rabbits, deer and small rodents. Aspen is a relatively short-lived species with growth beginning to decline from

age 40 to 70, depending on site conditions. A disturbance dependant species, aspen grows in clones by sprouting from the roots when it is cut. Reproduction is inhibited by overhead shade. In order for the root suckers to grow well and become a part of a future stand, the forest canopy must be open for adequate sunlight to reach new growth. Much of the aspen in the project area is beginning to decline from age. Without some disturbance, it will soon be eliminated from stands, decreasing an important source of food for wildlife.

**Songbird Habitat Improvement** – There is a need to improve the variety of canopy layers to provide optimum nesting and foraging cover for songbirds, and over time, create structural diversity found in older habitat. Mature-forest conditions will continue to dominate the remaining areas of each stand. Since a mature overstory is retained, these stands will continue to provide habitat for primarily mid- to late- successional species. This treatment will also provide the stand structure needed by mature forest wildlife that uses small seedling components.

**Snowshoe Hare Habitat Improvement** - Snowshoe hare occurs in second growth beech/birch/maple forests and in young spruce stands both with dense rhododendron cover. They feed primarily on beech, birch, blueberry brambles, grasses, hemlock, highbush cranberry, maples, red spruce, rhododendron and serviceberry. There are about 800 acres of suitable habitat within the watershed. According to the Forest Plan population objectives for snowshoe hare, the planning area population objective is 54 snowshoe hare/square mile in a mixed hardwood type. Snowshoe hare is a West Virginia small game species with a daily bag limit of two; however, WVDNR does not track annual harvest numbers. The Forest is currently working with the Northeast Forest Experiment Station in Parsons, WV to develop a monitoring plan for snowshoe hare. Harvest activities identified to occur within high elevation forest types should help to create snowshoe hare habitat as thick understory vegetation develops after harvesting.

**Indiana Bat Habitat Improvement** - The southern portion of the Upper Williams River Watershed is within five miles of an Indiana bat hibernacula. The Forest Plan has designated areas within five miles of hibernacula as “primary range”. Emphasis will focus management of tree species to provide a continuous supply of suitable roost trees and preferred foraging habitat for Indiana Bats.

### **3. Public Involvement**

Scoping both internally and externally raised no concerns that were determined to be extraordinary circumstances.

On December 19, 2006, a scoping letter was sent out to 74 individuals and organizations asking for responses to the proposal. A press release describing the proposed action and comment period was published in the Pocahontas Times on December 19, 2006. The scoping letter and information packet were also posted on the MNF website. Additionally, public involvement addressing these activities were conducted during development of the Upper Williams River Watershed Assessment and subsequent NEPA documentation. This included mailings, field trips and posting on the MNF website.

Comments specific to this proposal were received from the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, Ruffed Grouse Society and Beth Little. Comment letters are contained in the project file at the Marlinton Ranger District office in Marlinton, West Virginia. Most comments were supportive of the proposed action. A few questions were raised and have been addressed via telephone or e-mail.

#### **4. Findings Required By Law**

This project is consistent with the 2006 Forest Plan. The actions in this project fully comply with the Forest-wide standards as well as standards applying to management areas (2006 Forest Plan) and management prescriptions where the actions will take place. This project complies with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27(b):

1. It is best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area based on the direction in the 2006 Forest Plan. This suitability is based on the potential environmental, biological, cultural resource, aesthetic, engineering, and economic impacts.
2. No regeneration harvesting is proposed.
3. This action has not been chosen primarily due to cost considerations, although this was taken into consideration.
4. This action has been chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.
5. The proposed actions will avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.
6. The action will provide the desired effects on water quantity and quality, wildlife and fish habitat, woody regeneration, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and resource yields.
7. The project will need no additional road building.

#### **5. Implementation Date**

This decision may be implemented immediately.

#### **6. Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities**

This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant 36 CFR 215.8(a)(4).

## **7. Contact Person**

James McCormick  
Wildlife Biologist  
Monongahela National Forest  
PO Box 210  
Marlinton, WV 24954  
(304) 799-4334 ext. 25  
e-mail: [jmccormick@fs.fed.us](mailto:jmccormick@fs.fed.us)

## **8. Signature and Date of Responsible Official**

/s/Rondi L Fischer  
**Rondi L. Fischer**  
**District Ranger**

**September 5, 2008**  
**Date**