United States Department of Agriculture **Forest Service** **Monongahela National Forest**

Greenbrier Ranger District
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File Code: 1950, 2470 **Date**: June 26, 2006

Subject: Ramshorn Scoping Letter

To: Interested Parties

Opportunity to Comment

Ramshorn Project

The Greenbrier Ranger District is proposing to implement vegetation management activities and associated roadwork in the Ramshorn project area over the next ten years.

Please take a few minutes to review the following information and provide your comments about proposed activities.

Your comments will be used to identify relevant issues. They will help guide the environmental analysis and documentation. Please be as specific as possible when responding. If you provide data or research results, please identify why the information is pertinent to the Ramshorn project and provide a copy of the information.

For additional information about this project, or to provide comments, please contact Kristine Vollmer, the Team Leader for the project. You can reach her at Monongahela National Forest, Cheat-Potomac Ranger District, HC 59, Box 240, Petersburg, West Virginia, 26847; or by phone at 304-257-4488, extension 24. You may also email comments to comments-eastern-monongahela-greenbrier@fs.fed.us. Please include the project name in the subject line of the e-mail.

To best use your comments, please provide them within 30 days of the date of this letter. If you do not wish to comment at this time, but would like to continue receiving information about this project, please let us know. Additional information about this project will be mailed to those people who have submitted comments during the analysis process and to those who request additional information.

Also let us know what format you prefer to receive information in: hard copy; e-mail; or CD. It is the responsibility of interested parties to respond to this notice within the established time period. No means of communication is perfect. Please contact our 'for additional information' address above if a document is not available or delivered at the expected time, to ascertain its availability, and if necessary, to arrange an alternate delivery method.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted only anonymously will be accepted and

considered; however, those who submit anonymous comments may not have standing to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR Part 215.

Overview

The Greenbrier Ranger District of the Monongahela National Forest proposes to implement vegetation management projects and associated road activities within the Ramshorn project area over the next ten years (Figure 1, Vicinity Map) to help meet direction in the Monongahela Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, 1986). The projects and activities described below form the preliminary Proposed Action Alternative. I expect an Environmental Assessment will be prepared to disclose the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the Proposed Action, the No Action Alternative, and any alternatives that may be developed in response to public or internal issues. This letter provides information on:

- Location of the Ramshorn project area (see Figure 1 – Vicinity Map)
- Forest Plan direction for this area (both Forest-wide direction and site-specific direction)
- The purpose of and need for the proposed vegetative projects and associated activities
- Possible actions that will help to accomplish the purpose and need (also see Figure 2 – Proposed Action Map at the end of this letter)
- Public involvement opportunities

Location

The 16,955-acre Ramshorn project area is located approximately 1.5 miles from Green Bank, West Virginia, in Pocahontas County (Figure 1, Vicinity Map). It is bounded by: the North Fork of Deer Creek to the north; State Highway 6 to the west; the Greenbrier/Marlinton Ranger District boundary to the south; and the West Virginia/Virginia line and Elleber Run Road (FR 1681) to the east. Approximately 13,829 acres of National Forest System lands and about 3,126 acres of private lands are contained within its boundary.

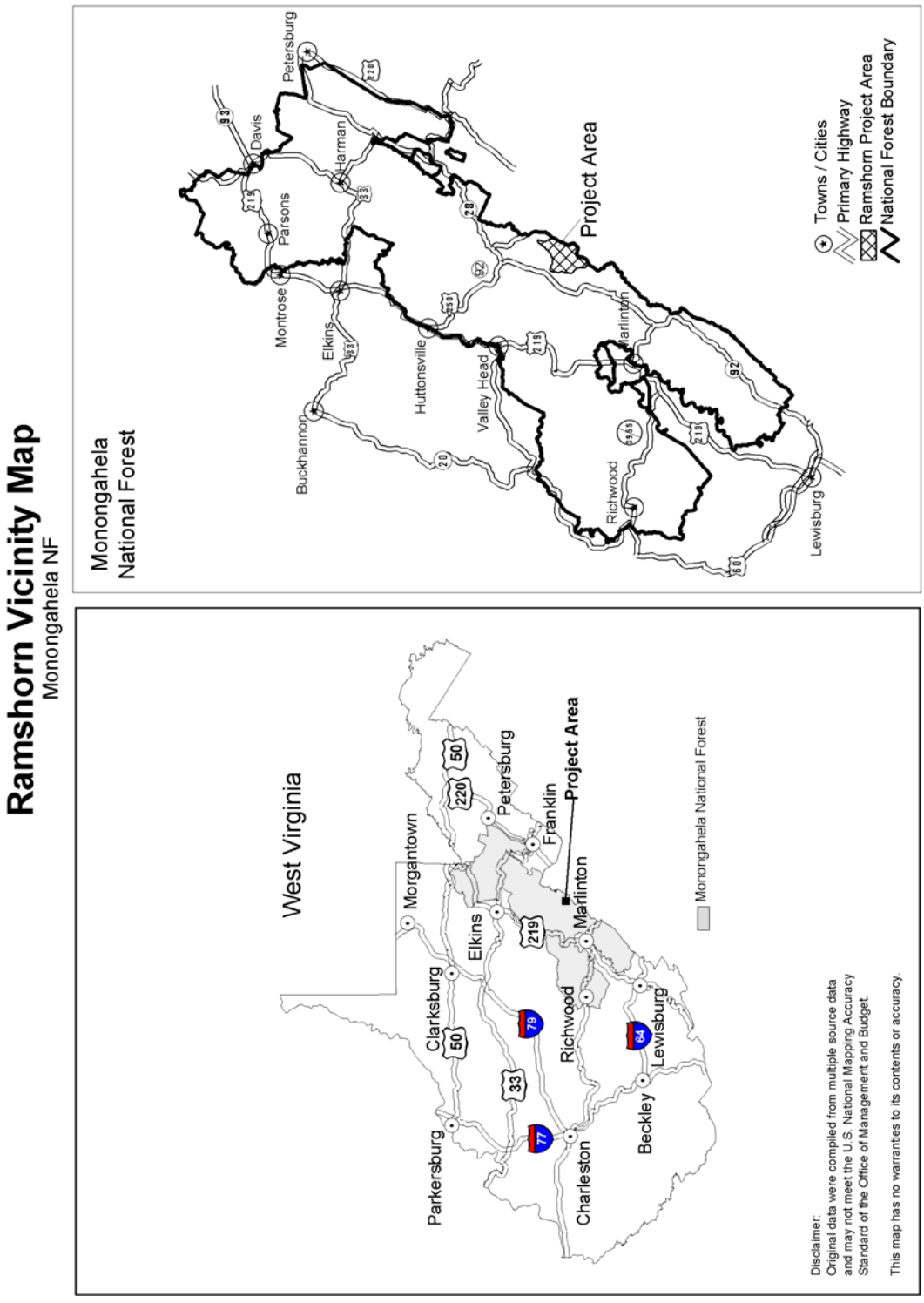
The Ramshorn project area encompasses all lands within Compartments 114, 115, 116, 117, 120, 121, and 122, and a portion of Compartment 113 on the Greenbrier Ranger District. The project area is made up of all of the Elleber Opportunity Area (OA #36.122), part of the Sutton Run OA (#36.123), and most of the Galford OA (#36.124).

Subwatersheds in the Ramshorn project area include: Griffin Run; Elleber Run; Rattlesnake Hollow; Tacker Fork; Bearpen Hollow; Sutton Run; Hamilton Run; Cooper Run; Rosen Run; North Fork of Deer Creek; Left Prong of Galford; Galford Run; and Stony Run.

Forest Plan Direction

All lands within the Ramshorn project area are allocated to Management Prescription (MP) 6.1 (Forest Plan Environmental Impact Statement Maps). Management of MP 6.1 lands is guided by Forest-wide and MP 6.1 standards and guidelines (Forest Plan, pp. 47-104, 164-182, and A-1). Two of the purposes identified for lands with MP 6.1 are to manage for “remote habitat for wildlife species intolerant of disturbance” and to provide “a mix of forest products” (Forest Plan, p. 164). Forest management activities are to be used to achieve vegetative diversity that will enhance habitat of the featured wildlife species.

Figure 1. Ramshorn Vicinity Map



MP 6.1 lands are to provide "a mosaic of tree stands and openings with a near optimum quantity and dispersion of the habitat elements that feature the wild turkey and black bear along with associated wildlife species" (Forest Plan, pp. 165 and L-2). Page 165 in the Forest Plan states "management emphasis will focus on manipulation of the naturally occurring tree species composition to optimize hard mast production, age class distribution, and ensure a continuous mast supply." Management activities are also to "help stabilize the long run sustained yield of timber products" (Forest Plan, p. 165). The Forest Plan (p. 74) states that "commercial timber sales shall be the means of accomplishing most vegetation manipulation work".

The Forest Plan encourages the use of even-age regeneration practices and thinnings to achieve desired habitat conditions, such as creating open understory conditions for turkey, developing a diversity of stands for bear, and regenerating shade-intolerant and moderately tolerant mast-producing tree species for featured species (Forest Plan, pp. 174, 176, and J-7). These practices also provide forest products.

Purpose of and Need for Action

The purpose of taking action in the Ramshorn project area is to maintain the habitat elements needed by featured MP 6.1 wildlife species of the black bear and wild turkey associations, resolve existing forest health concerns in the area, and provide forest products.

- **Improve the age class distribution of forested stands to maintain a variety of wildlife habitats, including early-seral (young) habitat.**

  Currently, forested age classes are not balanced as desired**.** Approximately 10,915 acres (79%) of the approximately 13,829 acres of National Forest System lands in the project area are 75-119 years old. Action is needed to balance forested age classes by increasing the amount of younger stands for wildlife. Regeneration treatments will also help stabilize the long run sustained yield of timber products.

- **Perpetuate a diversity of mast-producing tree species, both shade-tolerant and shade-intolerant species, to successfully regenerate and thrive over time in the overstories within the project area.**

  Currently, several mast-producing tree species (for example, chestnut oak, hickory, northern red oak, black cherry, and beech) grow and produce mast in the project area. For the most part, the species diversity within the overstories of 75-year old stands is greater than the species diversity of their understories. Shade-intolerant species (such as oak) are not successfully regenerating and becoming established in the understories of existing stands. Their survival is being hindered by competition with other vegetation and by deer browse. The diversity that exists in the overstory of these stands is a result of past natural (fire, for example) and human (logging, for example) disturbances.

  If action is not taken in this area, existing forest species diversity is expected to change; shade-intolerant species (such as oak) are expected to decline, while shade-tolerant species (for example, sugar maple, red maple, beech) are expected to increase. As mast producing trees age, their mast production is expected to decline. The Forest Plan

indicates naturally occurring tree species composition may be manipulated to optimize hard mast production and ensure a continuous mast supply over time.

- **Maintain or improve the health and vigor of mast producing tree species.**

  Currently, the health and vigor of some stands are declining. Most of the project area contains closed-canopy, even-aged stands 75 years old or older. Many stands, including past regeneration units, are overstocked; trees are growing closely together and competing for light, moisture, and nutrients. This competition hinders individual tree vigor and reduces the amount of mast available for wildlife.

  To optimize hard mast production and ensure a continuous mast supply in the area, mast-producing trees need more light, moisture, and nutrients. Action is needed to reduce vegetative competition and improve the health and vigor of mast-bearing species. In plantations, actions such as thinning and timber stand improvement may be needed.

- **Maintain open and brush habitat.**

  Currently, open habitat is becoming overgrown and will eventually decrease. Open and brushy habitat provides nesting, foraging, and herbaceous cover habitat for featured MP 6.1 wildlife (such as turkey poults and small mammals). In addition, the nonnative invasive species garlic mustard has been found in the area. Wildlife will benefit when open and brushy habitat is available and nonnative invasive species are eliminated or controlled.

  The Forest Plan standards & guidelines (p. 166) call for at least five percent of the gross area to be in permanent openings. Action is needed to maintain permanent openings and brushy areas. Action is also needed to prevent nonnative invasive species from becoming established and spreading.

- **Maintain shade in riparian areas and along streams.**

  Currently, the hemlock wooly adelgid is infecting and killing hemlocks. In areas where hemlocks provide shade to streams, shade will decrease as the hemlocks lose their needles and fall to the ground. This would likely lead to increased temperatures in streams and riparian areas. Wildlife and aquatic species will benefit when shade is maintained along streams and in riparian areas. Underplanting of conifers is needed to maintain shade in these areas.

- **Maintain the conifer component.**

  Currently, there are a few Norway spruce plantations in the project area and a few red spruce scattered in overstories at higher elevations. Wildlife will benefit from having a conifer component in the forested landscape. The Forest Plan standards and guidelines (p. 166) state that the conifer component should range from 5 to 25 percent of the area. Management of vegetation is needed to achieve this goal.

Over time, natural succession, windstorms, insects, disease, and other events could change existing vegetative conditions in the project area and help create some of the desired conditions described above. Such events, however, are random and unpredictable. Commercial timber sales are a predictable means of developing the diversity and distribution of habitat conditions needed by featured species and would meet the purpose of providing forest products.

Possible Actions

See Figure 2 - Ramshorn Project Area Proposed Action Map at the end of this letter. This map shows potential treatment units and potential roads that will be considered under the Proposed Action Alternative. As surveys continue and potential effects are analyzed for different resources (for example, wildlife, fish, plants, heritage resources, soil, water quality, scenery, transportation system, special uses), proposed treatment units and road proposals may be modified. The final proposed action will meet Forest Plan standards and guidelines and other applicable direction.

To achieve the purpose and need for action in the Ramshorn project area, the following actions are being considered in the Proposed Action:

- The map shown in Figure 2 includes approximately 1,675 acres of regeneration and thinning treatments. These activities may produce up to 5 MMBF (million board feet) of timber through commercial timber sales, although the final volume is expected to be somewhat lower.
  - Regenerate stands 70 years old or older to create early-seral habitat (young stands) and keep a diversity of mast-producing species. Potential methods of regeneration include shelterwood and clearcut with reserves. Regeneration treatments are proposed for approximately 1,125 acres, which is about 8 percent of National Forest System lands in the Ramshorn area.
  - Remove low quality, poorly formed, and diseased trees from approximately 550 acres of existing stands to improve the health, vigor, and mast production of shade-intolerant species. Potential methods include thinning and timber stand improvement.
  - About 1,275 acres of the regeneration and thinning treatments would use conventional methods; about 175 acres would use alternative – cable methods; and about 225 acres would use alternative – helicopter methods.
- Pre-treat regenerated stands with herbicides, prescribed fire, or some other method to reduce vegetative competition and allow shade-intolerant species to compete successfully. Approximately 4,900 acres are proposed for prescribed fire and/or other pre-treatment. This is more than is allowed under the Forest Plan. If the alternative selected by the decision maker in the final decision document exceeds Forest Plan limits for prescribed fire, a Forest Plan amendment would be needed before implementation could take place.
- Fence regeneration units or use some other method after harvest, if monitoring indicates it is needed, so deer browse does not prevent successful regeneration of shade-intolerant species.

- Maintain approximately 300 acres of openings or savannahs to provide open and brushy habitat for featured wildlife species.
- Construct or reconstruct roads necessary for vegetation management. Decommission or store roads not needed in the near future. The map in Figure 2 shows 8.6 miles of proposed new road construction, 5.4 miles of proposed reconstruction (these are mostly existing wood roads that might need some improvement); and 1.7 miles of proposed temporary roads (these would be ripped and seeded if necessary after use). Roads proposed for decommissioning will be identified after more extensive field work, and will be included in the draft Environmental Assessment.
- Plant hemlock and other desired species over approximately 100 acres where hemlock is dying to maintain shade along streams and riparian areas.
- Plant red spruce and other desired species over approximately 280 acres to restore conifer habitat for wildlife species.
- Treat nonnative invasive species to prevent their spread. So far, several areas of garlic mustard have been identified. Additional areas may be identified and treated during project implementation.

Public Involvement

Scoping (initial public involvement) for this project is being initiated with this letter and with the submission of a legal notice in the *Pocahontas Times*, the newspaper of record for this project. Relevant comments will help guide the analysis, including development of alternatives.

This project is listed in the 3rd quarterly issue of the Monongahela National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) and will continue to be listed until a decision is made. The SOPA is available at http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/mnf/ under "Forest Planning".

We expect to complete the draft Environmental Assessment in September. When it is available, a formal public notice will be given in the form of a legal notice which will be published in the *Pocahontas Times.* Individuals or organizations who previously provided comments on this project or indicated that they would like additional information on this project will also be notified.

I look forward to your participation in the management of the Monongahela National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ Kevin L.Taylor for
DON PALMER
Acting District Ranger