



File Code: 1950, 2470

Date: April 27, 2007

Subject: Ramshorn Scoping Letter #2

To: Interested Parties

Opportunity to Comment

Ramshorn Project

The Greenbrier Ranger District is proposing to implement a variety of 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.

This is the second scoping letter requesting comments on proposed activities in the Ramshorn project area. We are sending this second scoping letter for the following reasons:

- We are now under the direction of a new, updated Forest Plan. When the original scoping letter was sent out on June 26, 2006, we were using the 1986 Forest Plan. Later in 2006, the updated Forest Plan was finalized. The 2006 Forest Plan contains updated direction for desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines.
- We have received direction to include analysis of grazing allotment management in our projects. We have two grazing allotments in the Ramshorn project area – Elleber Sods and Ramshorn. Including these allotments will allow us to meet NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) direction for the allotments.
- Since the original scoping, we have recognized additional opportunities for managing the Ramshorn area. These include ideas from individuals who responded to our first scoping letter. One opportunity we are considering using in this area is the Stewardship contracting process, which is explained in more detail later in this letter.

If you previously provided comments in response to the first scoping letter last year, we still have your comments and will take them into consideration during our analysis. You do not need to repeat comments you've already made. If you have additional comments or ideas, please let us know. 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, 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.

Please provide your comments by May 17, 2007. Additional information about this project will be sent to those people who submit comments during the analysis process and to those who request additional information or request to be kept informed about the project.

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 scoping, 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, Ramshorn Vicinity Map) to help meet direction in the Monongahela Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, 2006). 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
- Forest Plan direction for this area
- The purpose of and need for the proposed activities
- Possible actions that will help to accomplish the purpose and need
- Public involvement opportunities

The Ramshorn Vicinity Map (Figure 1) is located on page 4. Two additional maps showing the proposed action are included with this letter: Figure 2 – Proposed Action; and Figure 3 – Proposed Action – Prescribed Fire and Grazing Allotments. Cutting Unit numbers have been changed since the original scoping. Table 1 – Crosswalk Between Old and New Unit Numbers is enclosed. This table shows the old unit numbers from the June 2006 map that was issued with the original scoping, cross walked to the new unit numbers on the enclosed April 2007 map.

Location

The 16,955-acre Ramshorn project area is located approximately 1.5 miles from Green Bank, West Virginia, in Pocahontas County (Figure 1, Ramshorn 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 the project area 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. 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

Forest-wide management direction is contained on pages II-1 through II-58 of the Forest Plan (2006).

All lands within the Ramshorn project area are allocated either to Management Prescription (MP) 3.0 or MP 6.1 (Forest Plan Environmental Impact Statement Maps).

The prescription for MP 3.0 lands emphasizes the following:

- Age class diversity and sustainable timber production.
- A variety of forest scenery.
- Habitat for wildlife species tolerant of disturbances, such as deer, grouse, and squirrel.
- A primarily motorized recreation environment.

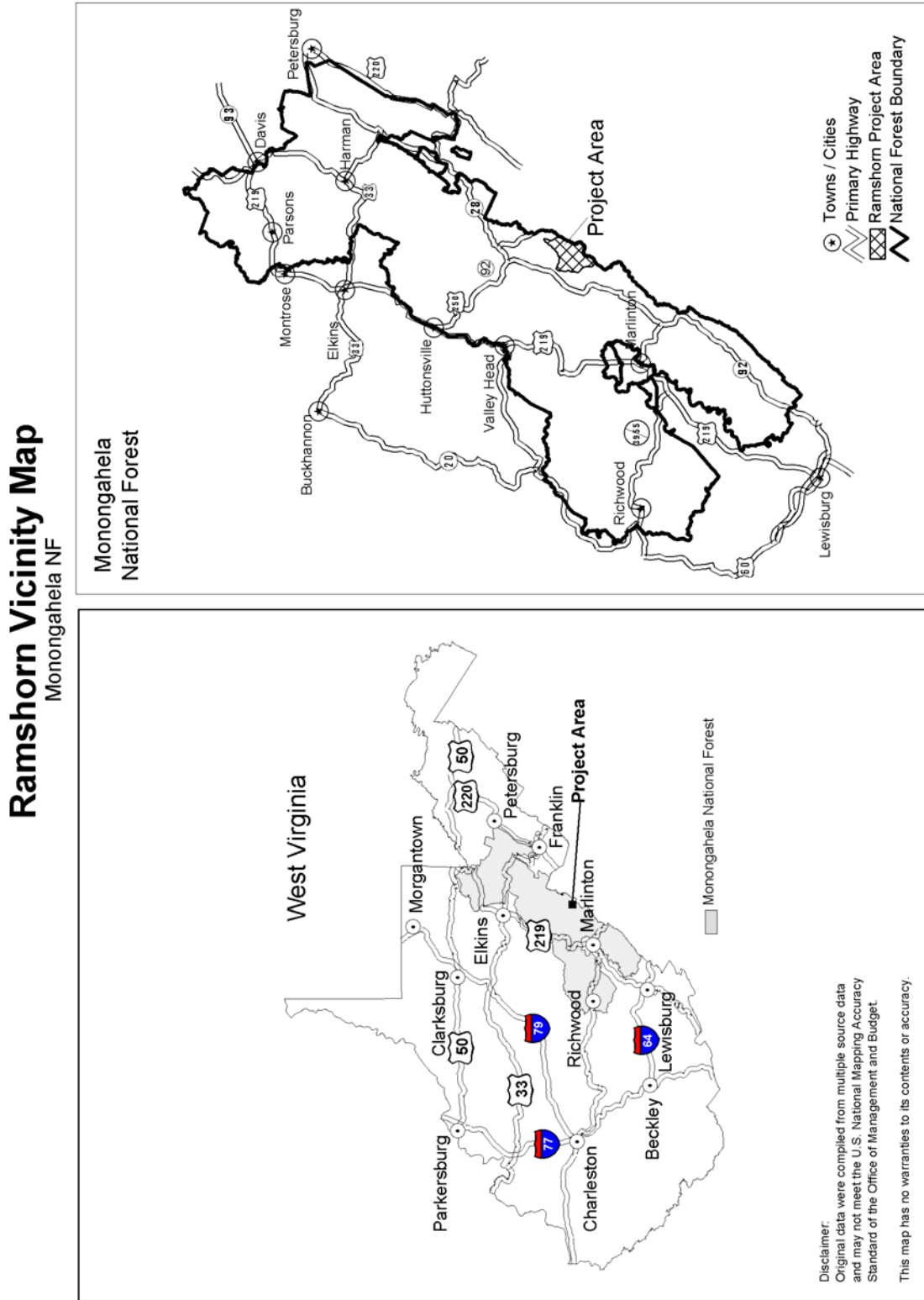
Information and direction specific to MP 3.0 areas, including the existing conditions, desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines, is contained on pages III-4 through II-8 of the Forest Plan (2006).

The prescription for MP 6.1 lands emphasizes the following:

- A vegetation management strategy that emphasizes sustainable production of mast and other plant species that benefit wildlife.
- Active restoration of pine-oak and oak-hickory communities.
- Restricted motorized access and a network of security areas that reduce disturbance to wildlife.
- A primarily non-motorized recreational setting.
- A mix of forest products.

Information and direction specific to MP 6.1 areas, including the existing conditions, desired conditions, goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines, is contained on pages III-31 through II-39 of the Forest Plan (2006).

Figure 1. Ramshorn Vicinity Map



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 and MP 3.0 wildlife species,
- resolve existing forest health concerns in the area,
- provide forest products,
- administer allotments, and
- evaluate road access for possible changes.

The bullets below provide detail on the needs of the Ramshorn area by describing the existing conditions and comparing those to the desired conditions in the Forest Plan.

- **Improve the age class distribution of forested stands to maintain a variety of wildlife habitats.**

Currently, forested age classes are not balanced as desired. Approximately 10,915 acres (79 percent) of the approximately 13,829 acres of National Forest System lands in the project area are 75 to 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 brushy 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 and MP 3.0 wildlife (such as turkey poult 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 desired conditions call for three to eight percent of the gross area to be in permanent openings. Action is needed to maintain and restore 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 woolly 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 with conifers which are not susceptible to hemlock woolly adelgid 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. Management of vegetation is needed to achieve this goal.

- **Restore fire-dependent ecosystems.**

Frequent surface fires ignited by Native Americans, European settlers, and lightning historically maintained open forests of oak, chestnut, and pine over much of the Appalachian Mountains, including portions of the Ramshorn project area. Reduced fire activity during the twentieth century has contributed to increases in tree and shrub density and to shifts in tree species composition. These changes have reduced habitat quality for plant and animal species that require open woodland habitat or are dependent on hard mast tree species. Reintroduction of fire into the appropriate areas would help

reconstruct these historic conditions and benefit wildlife by creating structural heterogeneity (improving habitat for a variety of bat and bird species), improve conditions to favor various soft mast species (such as blueberries), and stimulate flowering and fruiting of a variety of soft mast species, thereby improving wildlife foraging habitat. Additionally, fire can be used as a silvicultural tool in an effort to control vegetation that competes with various oaks.

A fire regime condition class (FRCC) is a classification of the amount of departure from the natural regime. The term “fire regime” (FR) is an indicator of the historic frequency of fire in a particular area prior to fire suppression efforts. FR I refers to areas that historically burned with low severity fires every 0 to 35 years, while FR III refers to areas that burned with mixed severity every 35 to 100 years. The term “condition class” (CC) is a relative measure describing the degree of departure from the historical natural fire regime. CC 2 means that fire frequencies have departed from historical ranges by one or more return intervals. CC 3 means that fire frequencies have departed from historical ranges by multiple return intervals

Currently, approximately 35 percent of the project area is in FR I, CC 3, while approximately 49 percent of the project area is in FR III, CC 2. Because of exclusion of fire ignition and/or fire suppression efforts, these areas are outside of the natural range of variability. Therefore, the continued existence of these fire-adapted ecosystems is being threatened by tree and shrub species not adapted to fire. The use of prescribed fire would help to restore these fire-dependent ecosystems. The goal is to move the condition classes back to CC 1 over time.

- **Provide sustainable timber production.**

Currently, forested age classes are not balanced as desired. Suited timberlands should provide sustainable and predictable levels of forest products. Since approximately 79 percent of the National Forest System land in the project area is 75 to 119 years old, action is needed to balance forested age classes by increasing the amount of younger stands. Vegetation management should be used to provide a sustained yield of timber, contribute to local and regional economies, achieve desired age class distributions, and benefit other resources. Regeneration treatments to increase the amount of younger stands and balance forested age classes will help stabilize the long-term sustained yield of forest products. Commercial timber harvest is a viable tool for accomplishing vegetation management objectives. Forest products include, but are not limited to, fuelwood, post and poles, and sawlogs.

- **Manage highway-licensed vehicle access on roads.**

Currently, many National Forest System roads in the area are closed. This project provides the opportunity to review the roads in the area and determine whether or not to open any additional roads to highway-licensed vehicles in MP 3.0 areas. MP 3.0 areas feature motorized recreation opportunities. MP 6.1 areas feature non-motorized recreation opportunities, and public motorized vehicle use is generally restricted. Roads that are not needed may be considered for storing or decommissioning.

- **Administer livestock grazing allotments.**

The Rescissions Act of 1995 mandates that grazing allotments be brought into compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. This project will satisfy that requirement for the Ramshorn and Elleber Sods Allotments. Opportunities exist to maintain or improve management of livestock grazing, associated facilities, and other resources on these allotments. Following the goals and objectives outlined in the Forest Plan will move the allotments towards the desired condition for range resources.

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 - Proposed Action map, and Figure 3 – Proposed Action – Prescribed Fire and Grazing Allotments map. These maps show potential treatment units, roads, prescribed burn areas, and the grazing allotments that will be considered under the Proposed Action. As field 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), alternatives may be considered. 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 1,600 acres of regeneration and thinning treatments. These activities may produce up to 5 MMBF (million board feet) of timber through commercial timber sales.
 - Regenerate stands 70 years old or older to create early successional 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 1,340 acres.
 - Remove low quality, poorly formed, and diseased trees from existing stands to improve the health, vigor, and mast production of shade-intolerant species. Potential methods include commercial thinning (approximately 260 acres) and noncommercial timber stand improvement (approximately 600 acres).
 - Approximately 1,160 acres of the regeneration and thinning treatments would be accomplished using conventional methods; about 290 acres by cable methods; and about 150 acres by helicopter methods.

- Treat regenerated stands with herbicides, prescribed fire, or some other method to reduce vegetative competition and allow shade-intolerant species to compete successfully. Approximately 5,160 acres are proposed for prescribed fire and/or other treatment.
- 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 or restore 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, public access, and grazing allotment management. Decommission or store roads not needed in the near future. The map in Figure 2 shows approximately 16 miles of proposed road construction (this includes existing woods roads that need improvement), and approximately 36 miles of road maintenance. Roads proposed for decommissioning will be identified after more extensive field work, and will be included in the draft Environmental Assessment.
- Plant red spruce 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. Several areas of garlic mustard have been identified. Additional areas and species may be identified and treated during project implementation.
- Grazing on the allotments is expected to continue. Improvements could include: fence repair; corral construction; road access improvement; cattle guard improvement; spring development; pond renovation; lime and fertilizer application; use of herbicides to control NNIS and undesirable weedy species; and use of fire.

Public Involvement

Scoping (initial public involvement) for this project was first initiated in late June, 2006, with the initial scoping letter and with the publication of a legal notice in the *Pocahontas Times*, the newspaper of record for this project. Scoping is being continued with this letter, and with the publication of another legal notice in the *Pocahontas Times*. Relevant comments will help guide the analysis, including development of alternatives.

Opportunities may exist to use stewardship contracting authority to implement some of the proposed projects. Stewardship contracting is a collaborative process beyond scoping, between the Forest Service, other agencies, organizations, individuals, and businesses. Stewardship contracting is a process which would allow receipts from timber sold to pay for other projects. It is a way to reinvest timber receipts in the local area.

Public Law 108-7, Section 323 grants the Forest Service (FS) authority to enter into stewardship contracting projects with private persons or public or private entities, by contract or by agreement to perform services to achieve land management goals for the National Forests or public lands that meet local and rural community needs. The Wyden amendment authorized the FS to enter into cooperative agreements with federal, tribal, state, and local governments, private and nonprofit entities, and landowners to provide for the protection, restoration, and enhancement of fish and wildlife habitat and other resources; the reduction of risk from natural disaster where public safety is threatened; or a combination of the two on public or private land within a watershed.

More information on stewardship contracting is available at <http://www.fs.fed.us/forestmanagement/projects/stewardship/index.shtml>

Specific stewardship projects have not yet been identified. Projects will be identified by working with the public. We are actively looking for ideas for potential projects and partners. Projects should be designed to meet the following key goals:

- Road and trail maintenance or obliteration to restore or maintain water quality.
- Setting of prescribed fires to improve the composition, structure, condition, and health of stands or to improve wildlife habitat.
- Removing vegetation or other activities to promote healthy forest stands, reduce fire hazards, or achieve other land management objectives.
- Watershed restoration and maintenance.
- Restoration and maintenance of wildlife and fish habitat.
- Control of noxious and exotic weeds and reestablishing native plant species.
- Soil productivity, habitat for wildlife and fisheries, or other resource values.

This project is listed in the quarterly Monongahela National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) and will continue to be listed until after 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. A decision will be made after the public has been provided the opportunity to provide comments on the draft Environmental Assessment.

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

Sincerely,

/s/Lauren Turner

LAUREN TURNER
Greenbrier District Ranger