



File Code: 3400

Date: October 31, 2008

## Interested Parties

Dear Friends of the Croatan National Forest:

The National Forests in North Carolina are proposing the extension of a multi-year project to control infestations of the southern pine beetle (SPB) in the Croatan National Forest (CNF). The program would use integrated pest management (IPM) techniques as needed to suppress outbreaks of SPB. The objective of the project is to prevent or reduce pest-caused losses and damage to resources on the CNF and neighboring properties. The project is proposed to begin as early as the winter of 2008. Infestation areas will be prioritized for treatment to meet the following management objectives: protect Red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) habitat and known clusters, protect pine communities, provide for public safety, minimize the spread of infestations to neighboring landowners, and reduce the risk of wildfire.

Included with this notice is a detailed description of the proposed action, purpose, and need for action, in addition to a map summarizing stands at risk for SPB infestation that would be eligible for suppression treatments under the proposed program. This document can also be found on the National Forests in North Carolina website at: <http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc/index.htm> . To assist us in determining issues and environmental effects associated with the proposal, I am asking for your comments and recommendations regarding the proposal.

Please note I am requesting your comments at this time as part of the 30-day legal comment period pursuant to 36 CFR 215.6(a) (3). I am conducting this 30-day comment period simultaneously with the initial scoping under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). You only need to submit one set of comments. If you wish your comments to be considered as part of the 30-day legal period, please ensure your comments are submitted within 30 days of the date the legal notice is published in the *Asheville Citizen Times*, the official newspaper of the National Forests in North Carolina. Your comments and suggestions will be considered in an addendum to the Environmental Assessment for the Control of Southern Pine Beetle on the CNF, originally completed in 1997. If you have comments, please include the following information:

1. Your name and address.
2. Title of the Proposed Action.
3. Comments (215.11(a)) on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision
4. Your signature or other means of identification verification. For organizations, a signature or other means of identification must be provided for the individual authorized to represent your organization.

You may mail or hand-deliver your written comments to: Forest Supervisor, National Forests in North Carolina, 160 Zillicoa Street, Suite A, Asheville, North Carolina, 28801-1082, between the



hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., Eastern Standard Time. Electronic comments are welcome also and can be submitted in a common digital format to:

[comments-southern-north-carolina@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-southern-north-carolina@fs.fed.us)

If you have any questions or would like more information about this project, please contact John Blanton, Forest Silviculturist, at 828-257-4200. I appreciate your continued interest in the management of the Croatan National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ Monica Schwalbach (for)  
MARISUE HILLIARD  
Forest Supervisor

Enclosure



## PROPOSED ACTION

The Proposed Action is to control southern pine beetle (SPB) infestations across the Croatan National Forest (CNF) using Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques. This action does not substantially deviate from the intent of the original Environmental Assessment (EA) and Decision Notice for the Control of Southern Pine Beetle on the Croatan National Forest (1997).

This proposal includes suppression of existing beetle spots and future suppression activities required for major SPB outbreaks, which tend to last from 3 to 5 years and occur in irregular cycles of 7 to 10 years. The last major outbreak occurred approximately 10 years ago. Given the time since the last outbreak and persistent drought conditions in the coastal plain of North Carolina, the onset of another major outbreak can be reasonably expected in the near future.

It is economically and environmentally impractical to treat every spot outbreak of SPB on the forest. Thus, the primary goal of the proposed action, consistent with the 1997 EA and Decision, is to reduce beetle populations rapidly to a low level in order to meet the following major objectives, which will be used to prioritize where suppression activities may occur:

1. Reduce risk to visitor and worker safety due to standing, beetle-killed trees;
2. Reduce risk to known red cockaded woodpecker (RCW) nesting and foraging habitat;
3. Reduce risk to neighboring property from infestation and associated wildfire hazards;
4. Minimize loss of pine communities, including the associated timber resources, rare species, wildlife habitat, and scenery;
5. Reduce risk of severe wildfires where fuel loading would be increased by beetle-killed trees.

Treatment method would be selected after field-checking and evaluating each beetle spot using a SPB Suppression Implementation Check Form, using the following criteria:

1. Monitor – to be used when there are no fresh attacks and no indication that the spot will spread. Also to be used in wilderness, pocosin areas with poor access, and in natural areas.
2. Cut and Remove (salvage) – to be used to control beetle spots where there is sufficient timber value or volume to sell commercially in areas with good access.
3. Cut and Leave – to be used to control beetle spots where timber value is low or not currently accessible, particularly during summer months when SPB spread would be sufficiently interrupted using this method alone.
4. Cut and Chip – to be used to control beetle spots where “Cut and Remove” and “Pile and Burn” are not recommended, particularly during winter months when “Cut and Leave” will not effectively control beetles and there is already access for grinding/chipping equipment. This method may also be preferred in areas where logs lying on the ground would adversely impact safety, recreation and scenery.
5. Pile and Burn – to be used very rarely, primarily during winter months where access issues would prevent the “Cut and Chip” method from being implemented.



Details on the application of each of these methods except “Cut and Chip” can be found in the Final EIS for the suppression of the SPB for the Southern Region (USDA FS, Volume 1, 1987). “Cut and Chip” procedures would be similar to those used in “Cut and Leave,” but logs would be mechanically chipped on-site after being felled.

## **IMPLEMENTATION CHECKS**

Proper implementation and reporting would be ensured as part of the proposed action. If a decision is made to go forward with the proposed SPB suppression action, the Forest Supervisor would establish an SPB interdisciplinary (ID) team for the Croatan SPB Suppression Project, and the District Ranger would establish a project manager. The function of the ID team would be to ensure all proper “Implementation Checks” are performed for each action taken under the SPB suppression program decision. The project manager would be responsible for implementing the requirements of the decision, and the Forest Silviculturist would be responsible for annual reporting. Training on the Implementation Checks procedure would be given prior to any action taken under the authority of a decision to go forth with the proposed action.

## **DESIGN MEASURES**

The Final EIS for The Suppression of the Southern Pine Beetle requires adherence to standards and guidelines in the selection and implementation of any beetle control program to occur on National Forest land in the Southern Region (USDA FS, 1987). Design measures described by the SPB EIS would be applied to the control methods proposed here, where relevant, in order to minimize adverse impacts to a variety of resource values and management objectives.

These measures would be implemented as follows:

### **Measures to provide for public safety**

1. Alert visitors and staff at recreation areas and trailheads if suppression activities are occurring.
2. Remove hazard trees within falling distance from recreation sites and trails.
3. Temporarily close off areas such as campsites or structures where suppression activities are likely to present direct hazards to visitors or workers.

### **Measures to protect Red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) population and habitat**

In accordance with the Record of Decision and Final EIS for the Management of the Red-cockaded woodpecker and its habitat on national forests in the Southern Region, a biologist and entomologist would recommend a course of action before taking control measures when RCW clusters, recruitment stands, and replacement stands are threatened by SPB (USDA FS, 1995). Specific guidelines are listed below:

1. Contact the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service for concurrence prior to cutting any active, inactive, or relict RCW cavity tree.

2. Complete a forage analysis in active RCW territories whenever the cut patch exceeds 25 acres in size. If the forage analysis indicates that “Cut and Leave,” “Cut and Chip,” or “Cut and Remove” operations will result in a reduction of forage below the minimum standard, get concurrence from the USDA Fish and Wildlife Service to proceed.
3. Retain all vacated SPB trees within RCW clusters unless they pose a threat to public safety.
4. Cut inactive or relict RCW cavity trees, if infested, within a designated treatment buffer zone only to protect the rest of the cluster.
5. Cut healthy trees within 200 feet of a cavity tree only to protect cavity trees.
6. Keep felled or piled woody debris at least 200 feet from active or inactive RCW cavity trees
7. No “Cut and Remove” operations will occur in RCW clusters during nesting season, which generally lasts from April through June.
8. Use only “Cut and Leave” to protect cavity trees during nesting season.
9. Do not use “Pile and Burn” within RCW clusters.
10. Install artificial cavity inserts to replace all RCW cavity trees lost from SPB.
11. Maintain longleaf pine in buffers where possible.
12. Replant treated areas with longleaf pine on sites where it is suited. Use the Ecological Classification to make this determination.
13. Retain a minimum of two (2) snags per acre greater than 12” dbh outside the RCW Habitat Management Area (HMA).

### **Measures to protect biological resources**

1. An Implementation Check will be completed prior to all suppression treatments to assure that potential habitat for proposed, endangered, threatened, and sensitive (PETS) species is avoided or mitigated. A biologist and/or botanist will design mitigation measures to protect rare species populations. Mitigation measures may include avoidance, use of “Cut and Leave,” “Cut and Chip,” or reduction in buffer width.
2. If rough-leaved loosestrife, an endangered plant, occurs in an SPB spot or within a control buffer, only the “Cut and Leave” method will apply.

### **Measures to protect wildlife resources**

1. Retain or protect live hardwood cavity/hardmast trees unless necessary for access or implementation of treatments. When hardwoods must be removed, emphasize leaving hardmast trees over other hardwood species.
2. Avoid using wildlife fields for skidding or decking where possible.
3. Restore wildlife fields to their original condition when activities are complete if they must be disturbed during SPB suppression activities.

### **Measures to protect soil and water resources**

Proposed SPB control activities would be conducted in compliance with the NC water quality regulations, referring to the NC Forest Practice Guidelines Related to Water Quality or NC Best Management Practices Manuals/Field Guides for recommendations as necessary. Activities

would also be conducted in accordance with the Final EIS for Vegetation Management in the Coastal Plain/Piedmont (USDA FS 1989). Measures that would be taken to protect soil and water resources include, but are not limited to the following:

1. No new system road construction will be permitted for the purpose of implementation of this proposal. In most cases, suppression activities will be accomplished using existing roads.
2. After suppression treatments are completed, temporary roads will be returned to general forest conditions by stabilizing the site and allowing the travel way to return to a forested condition through natural regeneration and seeding native annual or perennial vegetation on any exposed soil.
3. Temporary roads and spurs constructed for any treatment will not cross perennial streams.
4. Cross defined stream channels and drainage ditches with temporary bridges. Do not use temporary culverts. Fill material associated with crossings will be removed after use.
5. No hauling or skidding of harvested trees will occur within riparian areas except on existing travel ways.
6. Skid across dry ephemeral streams only when rutting will not occur. Dry areas may have water tables shallower than 12 inches. Do not skid across any defined stream channel.
7. Limit area disturbed by equipment or traffic to a maximum of 15 per cent of the salvage unit area (do not include system roads in calculation).
8. Construct minimum number of haul roads and log decks needed for salvage operations, consistent with requirements for reasonable access from system roads and minimum skidding distances. Locate roads and landings on the best drained sites in the area.
9. Use low ground pressure equipment when water is 12 to 18 inches from the soil surface.

### **Measures to protect archaeology**

The following measures will be followed to eliminate adverse impacts to National Register of Historic Places eligible (Class I) or potentially eligible (Class II) sites from SPB suppression treatments:

1. Areas to be treated with “Cut and Leave” will be reviewed through the Heritage Resources Atlas and land acquisition files to determine the presence of historic structure remains. These areas may be subject to pedestrian survey to verify historic structure presence. Directional felling may be necessary to avoid disturbing structure remains. No further archaeological compliance will be needed.
2. All SPB spots scheduled for treatment with “Pile and Burn,” “Cut and Chip,” or “Cut and Remove” methods will be checked by the zone archaeologist or forest archaeologist prior to any suppression activity. The Implementation Check will be documented.
3. SPB spots proposed for “Pile and Burn,” “Cut and Chip,” or “Cut and Remove” suppression methods would be compared to the Heritage Resource Atlas to determine if the area has had prior survey, has known sites, and the NRHP eligibility of the site. Areas previously surveyed with no sites or Class III sites require no further review and the suppression activity can occur; areas with known Class II sites must be avoided by any ground disturbing activities (skidding, road construction, etc.); known Class I or II sites

within or adjacent to treatment areas will be located and marked prior to suppression activities.

4. Areas with high and moderate probability landforms (well-drained soils and proximity to water courses) will require intensive archaeological field survey prior to any ground disturbance. Areas with low probability landforms (wet or poorly drained soils more than 150 yards from water courses) will not require a field survey prior to project implementation. Post-harvest monitoring will be conducted. Bedded plantations less than 35 years of age will be subject to the First Thinning compliance process. All newly located/recorded sites will be avoided.
5. The final decision to check or not check a project area will be made after the zone archaeologist or forest archaeologist consults the GIS soil map, geologic map, and heritage resource atlas.
6. All SPB areas surveyed in a fiscal year will be reported in a forest report to be submitted to the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) no later than June 1 of the following year.

### **Measures to protect recreation resources and scenery**

1. Use “Cut and Chip” or “Cut and Remove” methods in areas within or visible from recreation sites, eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers, or scenic class 1 or 2 roads and trails. Chip or remove debris as well as logs.
2. Leave understory vegetation and SPB-tolerant vegetation where possible in areas within or visible from recreation areas, eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers, or scenic class 1 and 2 roads and trails.
3. Construct temporary roads out of view from Wild and Scenic eligible river segments where possible.
4. Chip or crush logging debris along scenic class 1 and 2 roads when the cutting unit does not open directly onto the road.
5. Feather the edge of cutting units that open directly onto scenic class 1 and 2 roads.

### **Measures to protect aquatic resources**

1. Riparian management areas will be 150 feet to each side of perennial water bodies, including lakes and streams. Trees cut for suppression of beetle outbreak in this area will be left where they fall, unless they restrict water navigation.
2. Implementation Checks should occur to determine rare aquatic species presence, from which site-specific recommendations can be developed to minimize effects of suppression activities.

### **Measures to reduce effects on Wilderness**

Most SPB infestations would be allowed to run their course in designated Wilderness areas. The Final EIS for the management of RCW habitat maintains that RCW groups in Wilderness are not considered “essential” for recovery from an SPB perspective (1995). Thus, control of individual spots in wilderness would not be conducted under the proposed program unless site-specific analysis indicated that the spot(s):

- A. Would likely threaten the continued existence of RCW groups or their foraging habitat that is outside but immediately adjacent (within ¼ mile) to the wilderness boundary;
- B. Would likely expand and damage a susceptible host type on adjacent (within ¼ mile) private land, state land, or high-value resources on Federal land. “High-value” resources in this case could include administrative sites, developed recreation areas, tree seed orchards, and progeny test sites, but not timber values.

## **PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION**

The purpose of the proposed program is to protect Red-cockaded woodpecker habitat from southern pine beetle infestations through timely assessment and treatment of outbreaks, and to reduce the number and size of infestations in natural communities where multiple resource values could be adversely impacted by outbreaks. Sound management of SPB spots is needed to help prevent the Croatan National Forest from becoming a source of infestations to surrounding lands, public and private, and slow the spread of SPB in the coastal plain region.

The Croatan population of the Red-cockaded woodpecker is an integral part of the overall recovery of the species. Twenty-four of 39 populations identified in the 2003 RCW recovery plan nest and forage for food totally or in part on national forests. The CNF shares a recovery population with Camp Lajeune and the Holly Shelter Wildlife Refuge. By following a plan to connect this fragmented RCW population since 1992, the CNF has seen the number of RCW clusters increase from 44 to an average of 60. This increase has been accomplished solely by managing the existing population and habitat. Suppression of southern pine beetle outbreaks is needed to ensure the stability and growth of the existing population of RCW.

In addition to the RCW, other values would be adversely impacted by major beetle outbreaks in the absence of a suppression program. CNF ownership is intermingled with private land, much of which is pine-dominated commercial forestland. Unabated SPB outbreaks on CNF could create direct infestation threats to adjacent timber resources, and increase the wildfire risk to the forest and neighboring communities by increasing hazardous fuel loads. Prompt SPB suppression on CNF is needed to help protect neighbors and their livelihoods from beetles and fire.

Implementation of the proposed action will also preserve scenic values by reducing proliferation of beetle spots in sensitive viewing areas, such as eligible Wild and Scenic river segments and popular recreation areas. Importantly, controlling beetle spots will safeguard visitors and workers on CNF campgrounds, trails, roads, and administrative sites.

The proposed action, if implemented, would support many of the goals identified in the Croatan Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP), including:

1. Recover RCW Populations (2.1.1) by quickly treating SPB outbreaks where RCW foraging and nesting habitat would be lost due to infestation;
2. Identify and protect Special Interest Areas (2.1.2) where species and diversity are high and could be deteriorated by an SPB outbreak;



3. Recover and sustain rare species and communities (2.1.3) by limiting SPB spread in areas where species or communities would be adversely impacted by pine mortality;
4. River corridors eligible for Wild and Scenic River Status (2.3.2) would be protected through careful application of SPB treatment methods;
5. Restore longleaf pine (2.4.1) by promptly controlling SPB outbreaks in new and existing longleaf pine stands;
6. Reduce wildfire-related risk (2.5.1) by preventing the spread of SPB in stands where hazardous fuel loading would be created through SPB-related pine mortality.

**DECISION TO BE MADE**

Following review of public comments and developing the revised 1997 EA for the Control of SPB on the CNF, a decision will be made on whether the National Forests in North Carolina should implement this proposed action or an alternative approach to control southern pine beetle outbreaks within the Croatan National Forest.

**MAP**

**RCW Habitat Susceptibility to SPB on Croatan National Forest**

