

Record of Decision

Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan

Croatan National Forest

**United States
Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Southern Region
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for the
Revised Land and Resource Management
Plan

Croatan National Forest

Carteret, Craven, and Jones Counties of North Carolina

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Record of Decision

Introduction

This public Record of Decision (ROD) documents my decision and rationale for approving the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Revised Forest Plan) for the Croatan National Forest (CNF). Previously, there was one Land and Resource Management Plan for both the Croatan and the Uwharrie National Forests, which was approved in 1986. However, I have chosen to prepare separate Revised Forest Plans for these two National Forests. This Revised Forest Plan will guide all resource management activities on just the Croatan National Forest for the next 10 to 15 years.

The CNF is located on the eastern coastal plain of North Carolina. It covers small portions of three counties: Craven, Carteret, and Jones. In comparison with other national forests, the Croatan is relatively small—it covers about 161,000 acres. The forest's unusual biological features, topographic features, and location on the Atlantic Coast, however, make it far more interesting and important than its acreage might suggest.

The Croatan National Forest began with the New Deal Programs initiated during the Great Depression. These programs were designed to remove submarginal land from crop production and convert them to timber production. Due to agricultural use and abandonment, many acres were available in the tidewater region of North Carolina. Under the provisions of the Weeks Act of 1911 and the Clark-McNary Act of 1924, the Forest Service was given the authority to acquire land needed for timber production as well as protecting flows of navigable streams. In 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the CNF.

Perhaps the most interesting topographic features are the pocosins. The pocosins are concentrated at the center of the CNF. A few miles to the south of the central lakes and pocosins are sandy ridges that support old and very large longleaf pines, which have become rare in much of the South. The scarcity of mature longleaf pines does much to explain the endangered status of the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW), which is an important resident of the CNF. The longleaf pine-wire grass ecosystem is globally rare and currently represents only 3% of the historical range for the ecosystem.

Its special landscape features and the species they support make the CNF one of America's most valued forests. This Revised Plan outlines a strategy for conserving its treasures while allowing visitors to enjoy them wisely.

This Forest Plan is part of the long-range resource planning framework established by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA), the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA), and the 2000 Revision of the USDA Forest Service Strategic Plan. The National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA) requires all forests in the National Forest System to develop plans that direct

resource management activities on the forests. These plans are to be revised when conditions have changed significantly, or on a 10- to 15-year cycle.

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and Revised Forest Plan were developed according to the NFMA, its implementing regulations at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 219 (dated September 30, 1982 and as amended), the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), and the Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations at 40 CFR 1500-1508. The FEIS discloses the environmental consequences of the alternative management strategies and how they respond to issues and concerns.

This decision applies only to National Forest System lands on the Croatan National Forest, located in Carteret, Craven, and Jones Counties of North Carolina. It does not apply to any other Federal, State, or private lands, although the effects of these lands and the effects of my decision on lands surrounding the Forest are also considered.

My Decision

I selected Alternative E from the FEIS for the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Croatan National Forest. By selecting Alternative E, I am approving the Revised Forest Plan that describes the goals, objectives, standards, management prescriptions, and lands suitable for timber production for Alternative E.

Among the goals outlined in the Revised Plan we intend to:

- Conserve biological diversity, by recovering threatened and endangered species, maintaining rare communities, and concentrating on restoring habitats that have been lost over the last century;
- Increase recreational opportunities, especially those water-based camping opportunities in semi-primitive settings;
- Restore the longleaf pine/wiregrass community and expand populations of the endangered red cockaded woodpecker;
- Protect private and public lands from catastrophic wildfire by managing a wildland urban interface corridor as a defensible space;
- Use prescribed fire to reduce wildfire risks and restore the land more closely to its ecological potential;
- Adjust the pattern of motorized access by eliminating illegal access routes, clearly designating where off highway vehicles can be used, and identifying what roads are open for motorized public use;
- Collaborate with local communities and their governments to enhance the local economies and the attributes that make the CNF a special place to so many.

Components of the Decision

Components of forest plan decisions are outlined in the National Forest Management Act (1976). A forest plan establishes a framework for future decision-making by outlining a

broad, interdisciplinary program for achieving the desired goals, objectives, and future conditions of the Forest. A forest plan does not make a commitment to the selection of any specific project and does not dictate day-to-day administrative activities needed to carry on the Forest Service's internal operations. However, by applying forestwide management direction, the forest plan is implemented through the design, execution, and monitoring of site-specific activities.

The decisions I am making in this ROD for the Revised Forest Plan are:

Establishment of forestwide multiple-use goals and objectives (36 CFR 219.11 (b))

These are found in Chapter 2 of the Revised Forest Plan. The goals and objectives focus on achieving the desired future conditions (DFCs) of the Forest. The goals focus on direction for ecosystem restoration, conservation of biodiversity, sustainable forest management responsive to recovery needs of the red cockaded woodpecker, maintenance and enhancement of wildlife habitats, providing recreational opportunities, and contributing to social and economic health of local communities. The objectives provide specific outcomes for accomplishing the goals.

Establishment of forestwide management requirements (standards) (36 CFR 219.27)

Forestwide standards are found in Chapter 4 of the Revised Forest Plan. Standards are limitations on actions or thresholds not to be exceeded. I believe that the standards provide adequate direction for management, provide for resource protection, and serve to illustrate the intent of the Revised Forest Plan. To simplify the planning document, direction that would duplicate laws, policies, Forest Service Manual, and Forest Service Handbook direction or other regional directives is not included.

Establishment of management prescriptions and where they should be applied. (36 CFR 219.11 (c))

Management prescriptions are found in Chapter 3 of the Revised Forest Plan. Each prescription outlines a reference or desired condition, the likely future management practices to achieve the desired conditions, and standards. Twelve distinct management prescriptions will guide the design and implementation of future actions. Where these management prescriptions should be applied are shown on the Forest Plan Management Prescription Map. In some areas, such as wilderness, legal boundaries are specified by congressional acts. In others, boundaries are identified using ecological units, administrative boundaries, or other physical features. Two management prescriptions, special interest areas and old growth, are embedded within the broader context of the 12 management prescriptions cited above, in order to clarify management of smaller and unique lands.

Determination of land that is suitable for timber production (36 CFR 219.14) and establishment of the allowable sale quantity (ASQ) of timber (36 CFR 219.16)

The designation of lands suitable for timber production is found in Chapter 4 and Appendix I of the Revised Forest Plan. Approximately 25,700 acres or 16 percent of the Forest are designated suitable for timber production.

The ASQ is found in Chapter 4 and Appendix I of the Revised Forest Plan. The Revised Forest Plan projects an average annual ASQ of 8.76 MMCF (million cubic feet) for the next 10 years. The present budget levels, along with a projected slight increase in operational costs should provide sufficient funds to meet this ASQ.

Recommendations for non-wilderness allocations and recommendations for wilderness status (36 CFR 219.17)

Three additions to wilderness areas, Catfish Lake South Additions A & B and the Pocosin Addition, totaling 691 acres will be recommended for wilderness designation. These areas involve boundary adjustments to existing wilderness areas and include recent land acquisitions. The existing 4 wilderness areas will be maintained. Appendix C of the FEIS presents a description and effects analysis of roadless areas on the Forest for potential wilderness designation.

The remaining roadless areas will be allocated to Black Bear, RCW Habitat Management, and Wildland Urban Interface Management Prescriptions. While some management practices may occur within these areas, such activities would not change the areas' roadless characteristics, and would be consistent with the Roadless Area Conservation Rule published in the **Federal Register** on January 12, 2001. In implementing the Roadless Rule, road construction/reconstruction and timber cutting in inventoried roadless areas would only be allowed under the conditions specified in 36 CFR 294.12 and 294.13.

About 31,221 acres (19 percent) are currently designated as wilderness. They consist primarily of pocosin habitats. The roadless areas also consist of the same ecological landtypes.

Recommendations for wild and scenic rivers or other special use designations as appropriate (36 CFR 219.17)

White Oak River and Brices Creek are eligible for designation as wild and scenic rivers, however, no additional wild and scenic rivers are being recommended at this time. Due to the limited amount of CNF land along the White Oak River and Brices Creek, the State of North Carolina would be the appropriate agency to lead the suitability analysis of these river corridors. The Forest Service will cooperate with the state agencies if such analyses are undertaken. The outstandingly remarkable values of the White Oak River and Brices Creek on CNF land will be protected. Appendix D of the FEIS documents the values within these river corridors.

Designation of lands suitable for grazing and browsing (36 CFR 219.20)

No grazing permits are planned for the CNF.

Establishment of monitoring and evaluation requirements (36 CFR 219.11 (d))

These are found in Chapter 5 of the Revised Forest Plan. Specific monitoring questions are identified and directly linked to the Revised Forest Plan goals, desired conditions, objectives, standards, and specific regulatory requirements. These requirements ensure that my approach is adaptive and sustainability is being achieved or adjustments will be made.

Additional Decisions

Determination of lands administratively available for oil and gas leasing (36 CFR 228.102 (d))

Studies indicate there is no potential for oil and gas development on the CNF.

Regionwide Plans and Direction

The management requirements found in the following documents are being incorporated by reference and shall apply to the management of the CNF:

Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and its Habitat on National Forests in the Southern Region (RCW ROD)(USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, June 1995)

Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Coastal Plain/Piedmont (VM ROD)(USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, February 1989), as Supplemented (October 2002)

Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Suppression of the Southern Pine Beetle (SPB ROD)(USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, February 1987)

Rationale for Decision

I have decided to select Alternative E as the Revised Forest Plan for the CNF. I believe the Revised Forest Plan is within the physical and biological capability of the land and that this alternative can be implemented without reducing that capability. The Revised Plan is responsive to the Forest Service's National Strategic Plan (2000), and it meets our legal obligations to the people and environment that surrounds them. The optimal implementation rate for the Revised Forest Plan could require higher funding levels in

some areas than those currently allocated; however, I believe the management direction changes envisioned in the Revised Plan can be implemented under current budget levels. The attainment of desired conditions and outputs in some areas, however, may be prolonged or reduced if future budgets decrease.

The following discussions summarize many of the important factors that I considered. They explain why I believe Alternative E, as described in the FEIS, will maximize net public benefits when compared to the other alternatives.

The response of each alternative to the 7 significant issues was a major consideration in the decision to select Alternative E. The reasons for choosing the Selected Alternative are discussed below on an issue-by-issue basis. Chapter 3 of the FEIS describes in detail the effects of expected management actions on the various Forest resources.

Issue #1: Biological Diversity and Issue #4: Silviculture, Forest Products, and Forest Health

The responses to these issues are linked and will be discussed together.

Overview: For biological diversity, the overall goal is to maintain the native species and the ecosystems on which they depend. The Plan outlines the use of the coarse filter/fine filter approach for accomplishing these interests (Plan, Chapter 2, Section 2.1).

Woven into the theme of biological diversity is the amount and rate of restoration efforts for longleaf pine, and the methods used to restore these communities. Therefore, the silvicultural systems and the types of forest products are connected with the biological diversity issue.

About two-thirds of the CNF are pocosin and pond pine habitats, which are relatively intact to support native species, such as black bear. Prescribed fire is the primary tool for improving conditions of these habitats. The alternatives in the FEIS vary by the level of prescribed fire over the next 10 years.

About 20 percent of the landscape (around 30,000 acres) have potential longleaf pine ecosystems. About half of that potential longleaf is currently in loblolly pine or mixed loblolly and other pines. The alternatives vary by the amount and rate of the restoration of longleaf pine habitat and the methods used to restore that system. Since RCW expansion is linked to this habitat, the amount and rate of expansion of the RCW habitat management area and population vary for each alternative.

About 8 percent of the CNF are hardwood wetlands, lakes, streams, or ponds, which do not vary significantly among the alternatives. Except for hardwood restoration (1%), the remaining 6 percent of CNF are developed areas and off highway vehicle areas, which are discussed in subsequent issues.

Criteria: My criteria for addressing this issue and reviewing the alternatives are: 1) make reasonable efforts to implement recovery plans, particularly for RCW, 2) restore habitat at a pace where we can monitor and make adjustments in a timely manner, 3) use natural processes to restore or maintain habitat wherever possible, such as using prescribed fire rather than mechanical or chemical treatments, 4) restore longleaf pine, and during restoration, consider the development of the understory, specifically wiregrass, as well as the overstory system, 5) assure habitats are adequate for MIS species; 6) develop strategies for maintaining rare species, and 7) be responsive to comments on the Draft EIS and Proposed Plan.

Evaluation: All alternatives have long-term RCW population objectives (FEIS, Table 2.1). However, only Alternatives C, C-modified and E make reasonable progress in population levels over the next 10 to 15 years, with increases from 20 to 30 additional clusters.

Longleaf restoration is not emphasized in Alternatives A, B and D (FEIS, Table 2.7), and, therefore, the long-term RCW population goals may not be attainable (FEIS, Section 3.2.3). Alternatives C and C-modified provide a stark contrast by planning 4,000 acres of restoration, which means that nearly 1/3 of the total amount of longleaf pine restoration needs would be accomplished this planning period. In my opinion, this rate of restoration is too rapid to monitor, evaluate success, and make adjustments. Alternative E has a slower rate of longleaf restoration, about 15 percent of the total restoration needs, which would allow reasonable time to monitor success and make adjustments. This does mean, however, that longleaf restoration will continue for 60 years or more before full restoration potential is achieved.

Alternative B uses uneven-aged management to restore longleaf, but it is not likely that pure loblolly stands could be converted using uneven-aged techniques. Loblolly is an aggressive competitor and would outcompete longleaf without fire. Uneven-aged management techniques could be useful for regenerating pure longleaf stands. However, during this planning period, existing longleaf stands need only prescribed fire treatments, not regeneration.

Alternatives A, C, C-modified, and D propose clearcutting as the dominant method for restoring longleaf and regenerating mixed pines. Clearcutting and subsequent bedding of wetter sites are needed to assure stand regeneration; however, on drier sites, other techniques could be used. Using methods other than clearcutting would enhance other resource values, such as, retaining structure for wildlife species.

I believe the strategy for restoration that provides the highest net public benefit is Alternative E. First, it focuses on restoration of longleaf pine, not the regeneration of mixed pine during this planning period. The regeneration method to be used on drier sites in mixed pines is shelterwood with reserves, which retains some larger trees for RCW to use for nesting or foraging. On these drier sites, less intensive site preparation methods would be used in order to retain or restore the wiregrass component of the system.

Prescribed fire could be used on nearly 70 percent of the land base. While it is technically not feasible to prescribed burn all the longleaf, pond pine or pocosin habitats, I believe the higher levels of prescribed fire would sustain habitats by using natural processes rather than mechanical or chemical treatments. Alternatives A and B have levels that maintain less than one-third of the land base on a short prescribed fire return interval. Without additional prescribed fire, the pond pine and pocosin habitats would likely produce heavy shrub vegetation and decline in habitat value. Alternatives C, C-modified, D and E have prescribed fire levels that would reduce hazardous fuels and sustain longleaf pine, pocosin, and pond pine habitats (FEIS, Section 3.2.1).

For alternatives that do not emphasize longleaf pine restoration or prescribed burning, it is anticipated that MIS habitat would decline, and therefore, population trends would be static to decreasing. For example, black bear trends over the long term would likely be static to decreasing for Alternative A, due to decline in habitat from insufficient prescribed fire. Expectations are that Alternatives A, B and D would not provide habitat quality sufficient to sustain increasing trends for black bear, RCW, and longleaf pine/wiregrass system. Alternatives C, C-modified and E would provide conditions for trends to increase over the short and long terms.

The FEIS, Table 2.2 shows the percent of rare species within special interest areas, which vary by alternative. These areas act as a refuge for rare species and afford special consideration before any actions would be taken there. This strategy was formed to sustain rare communities and species. Alternatives A and D do not employ this strategy. Alternatives B, C, C-modified, and E all employ the strategy for conserving rare communities and species by capturing 70 to 72 percent of them within the special interest areas.

Response to Comments: The FEIS contains nearly 30 pages of text responding to concerns raised about biodiversity during the review of the DEIS and Proposed Plan. Please refer to FEIS, Appendix A, Section A.1 for details. However, I do want to expand the explanation about selection of Management Indicator Species (MIS).

Some comments received referred to the selection of MIS and discussed how few species were listed. Many additions to the list were recommended. However, the FEIS and Plan now show fewer species being selected than were in the DEIS and Proposed Plan.

In determining the species to be selected as MIS, we examined the list of proposed MIS and questioned how well each species would indicate effects of management practices. To address this question, CNF lands were aggregated into two groups: 1) Most affected landtypes where active management practices would occur, and 2) Least affected landtypes where no active management is planned, or activities are so infrequent and low impact that population changes would not be the result of effects from management practices.

The strategy was then to select species representing the most affected landtypes for monitoring population trends. Several species were chosen to monitor population

changes. On the least affected landtypes, effects of management practices are not believed to cause population changes. Therefore, species associated with these landtypes will be monitored through habitat conditions. This strategy is appropriate given the low level of risk to species in these least affected landtypes. As a result, the species that are now selected as MIS are those species deemed optimal for addressing the effects of management practices. Refer to the FEIS, Appendix G for more information on MIS selection.

Issue #2: Recreation Opportunities

Overview: The key interests of this issue are the types of recreational opportunities that should be emphasized on the CNF over the next 10 years.

The CNF is uniquely bounded by the following waterways: the Neuse, Trent and White Oak Rivers, and the forest is close to the Atlantic Ocean. A highly developed tourist market exists along the beaches of the Atlantic Ocean.

Over the past decade, the primary recreational uses have been hunting and fishing. Activities that are currently on the increase include biking, horseback riding, and wildlife viewing. There continues to be high demands for water-based, dispersed camping opportunities. With over 200 miles of open roads, the CNF is considered fully roaded and accessible for motor vehicles.

There are highly developed recreational camping sites on the CNF, but few designated dispersed sites. The current trail system does not clarify the types of uses, including where off highway vehicles (OHV's) are allowed. More than 70 miles of user-created, unauthorized trails are being used by off highway vehicles. The alternatives vary by the capacity of developed sites in rural and semi-primitive settings, the amount and types of trails offered, and how to manage the unauthorized roads and trails and OHV use.

Criteria: My criteria for evaluating alternatives for this issue are: 1) increase water based recreation opportunities in areas with least impacts to other natural resources; 2) establish a trail system to accommodate a variety of uses; 3) apply the criteria of Executive Order 11644 - Use of Off-Road Vehicles on the public lands to determine the amount and location of OHV use; 4) close out unauthorized roads and trails, 5) be responsive to comments on the DEIS and Proposed Plan.

Evaluation: Table 2.3 (FEIS, Chapter 2) displays differences by alternatives for developed recreational capacities and trail opportunities. Alternatives A and B do not emphasize recreational use and have much fewer opportunities than the other alternatives. Alternatives C, C-modified, D, and E meet my expectations for planned increases in the amount and types of recreational opportunities.

Alternative D is designed to provide additional access. That means some of the unauthorized roads would need to be put on the transportation system. Since the Forest is

considered fully roaded, it is my opinion that the additional access provided in Alternative D would saturate the CNF with road use.

Executive Order 11644 requires designations of areas and trails to: minimize damage to soil, watershed, vegetation, or other resources of public lands; to minimize harassment of wildlife or significant disruption of wildlife habitats; and minimize conflicts among users. It is my opinion that Alternatives B and E provide OHV opportunities while protecting the other resources. Alternatives A, C, C-modified, and D, however, would not minimize damage to other resources of public lands.

Response to Comments: Refer to the FEIS, Appendix A, Section A.2 for comments and responses on the DEIS and Proposed Plan. I will elaborate on comments and responses related to OHV use.

Comments on the Proposed Plan about OHV use were focused on decreasing the amount of use and potential damage to other resources. There were no comments that called for increasing OHV use. In the Proposed Plan, OHV trails would be designated in 2 geographic areas: Black Swamp Road area and Deep Sand Road area. The Deep Sand Road area has sandy soils that resist erosion. However, there is evidence that OHV users are going off trails and widening out areas, thus stripping the vegetative cover. The habitats of the Deep Sand Road area support many rare plant and animal species. Therefore, I believe Alternative E, which eliminates the Deep Sand road area from OHV use, meets the intent of EO 11644 to minimize the damage to other resources of public lands.

The Black Swamp road area will continue to serve OHV users. The travel routes are dikes made in the 1960's. Riders are encouraged to stay on the travel routes by natural constraints. The wet mucky soils in the adjacent areas restrict access. However, I realize that the Black Swamp road area may not provide the very best location for OHV use because maintenance costs would be expensive and users may want different riding experiences. Therefore, I encourage the Forest Supervisor to work with the local community of users and other interest groups to monitor the Black Swamp Road area and determine if the amount and type of OHV use is acceptable, or if there is a need for other OHV areas.

Issue #3: Special Land Allocations

Overview: There are 2 components to special land allocations: 1) management of existing wilderness and recommendations of roadless areas for wilderness, and 2) recommendations of river corridors eligible for wild and scenic river status.

There are 31,221 acres in 4 designated wilderness areas on the CNF. They are comprised primarily of pocosin habitat with small portions of pond pine. Maintaining pocosin and pond pine habitat in wilderness is a management concern due to the restrictions on management practices. With the absence of fire in these ecological systems, fuels will accumulate and raise the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

Many of the wilderness boundaries are directly adjacent to private lands. When planning a defensible space (wildland urban interface zone) to protect adjacent landowners from possible catastrophic wildfires (approximately 2,500 acres along wilderness boundaries fall into this zone) there will be conflicts between the management objectives of wildland urban interface and wilderness. To minimize potential future conflicts, standards in the plan require site-specific proposals to use the Minimum Requirement Decision Guide (Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center 2002) for treatment options in wilderness areas.

There are 6 roadless areas (about 20,000 acres) evaluated for potential wilderness (FEIS, Appendix C). The roadless areas are primarily pocosin and pond pine habitat, which is similar to the existing wilderness areas. The recommendations of roadless areas for wilderness vary by alternative.

Two rivers corridors are eligible for wild and scenic designation, the White Oak River and Brices Creek. The final classifications of these rivers are pending. Since the CNF land comprises less than 20 percent of the White Oak River Corridor, and less than 35 percent of Brices Creek Corridor, the State of North Carolina would be the appropriate agency to lead efforts to study the suitability of these corridors for wild and scenic status. The Forest Service would cooperate if these studies are undertaken. The alternatives in the FEIS vary by whether or not measures are stipulated for protecting the outstandingly remarkable values of these river corridors eligible for wild and scenic river status.

Criteria: My criteria for evaluating alternatives for this issue are: 1) recommend roadless areas for wilderness when there are demonstrated needs, and 2) protect outstandingly remarkable values of river corridors eligible for wild and scenic river status until the State of North Carolina, with the Forest Service as a cooperator, completes the suitability analyses, and 3) be responsive to comments on the DEIS and Proposed Plan.

Evaluation: The total acreage of existing wilderness and recommendations of roadless areas for wilderness area vary by alternative (FEIS, Chapter 2, Table 2.4). Alternative B recommends all roadless areas for wilderness, C-modified recommends 1 roadless area, and Alternatives C, D, and E recommend only the small additions due to recent land acquisitions. No additional wilderness is recommended in Alternative A.

Alternatives C, D and E set the course of action that deliver the highest net public benefit on this issue. No compelling need for recommending roadless areas for wilderness has been raised. Adding the small inclusion of new acquisitions, about 691 acres is reasonable. However, there are no advantages to managing the other roadless areas as wilderness. There are no unique ecological types, or special places for recreating, or areas for research needs of wilderness management that cannot be met within the existing wilderness. I believe that additional wilderness allocations would detract from other needs that exist in the area. For example, wilderness management places restrictions that affect both fire management and military over flights. The precedent of these needs has been established over the past several decades. Without any evidence that further

wilderness recommendations are needed, I believe it is in the best public interest to allow fire management and military over flights to proceed in roadless areas.

Protection measures of river corridors eligible for wild and scenic recommendations vary by alternative (FEIS, Table 2.5). Alternatives B, C, C-modified and E meet the criteria of protecting the values of these river corridors, until further studies are completed.

Response to Comments: Refer to the FEIS, Appendix A, Section A.3 for comments and responses on the DEIS and Proposed Plan. I will elaborate on comments and responses related to roadless area allocations.

For Alternative E, more than 75 percent of the roadless areas are allocated to the Black Bear Management Prescription. Desired conditions for this prescription (Plan, Section 3.9) includes the following: “Public recreational use is low and infrequent. The area is mostly unroaded. Some existing roads may be closed to public motorized vehicle use. Recreation settings are semiprimitive. Management activities in the area are restricted to those that enhance natural community features. Users will experience a sense of isolation and remoteness, similar to that experienced in designated wildernesses.” Although some of the sense of isolation could be compromised by military over flights, I believe that most of the characteristics people want for wilderness would be maintained in the roadless areas. Similarly, about 9 percent of the roadless areas are designated to hardwood wetlands or small pocosin patches where management activities would be infrequent and low impact.

About 13 percent of the roadless areas fall into prescriptions that could change the current condition: RCW Habitat Management Area (about 10 percent) and Wildland Urban Interfaces (about 3 percent). Yet, these prescriptions are primarily on the outer edges of the roadless areas and management practices for these prescriptions would not change the roadless characteristics.

Issue #4 Fire Management

Overview: The key interests related to this issue is: 1) how to protect the CNF and adjacent private lands from catastrophic wildfires, and 2) what level of prescribed fire is necessary to reduce hazardous fuel and maintain habitats.

About 70 percent of the CNF is occupied by short interval fire-adapted ecosystems such as pine forest and pocosins. Without fire, these systems produce thick shrub environments that cause intense, and sometimes catastrophic wildfires. Also the thick brush may displace sensitive plants that require open conditions.

Criteria: My criteria for evaluating alternatives include the following: 1) provide for human health and safety, 2) reduce risks to property and other resources, and 3) reduce risks of losing short interval fire adapted ecosystems, 4) responsive to comments on the DEIS and Proposed Plan, 5) implement the National Fire Plan.

Evaluation: A wildland fire risk rating is provided in the FEIS, Section 2.3.5. Alternatives C, C-modified, D, and E provide the least risk of wildfire due to the establishment of 2 factors: 1) a defensible space called the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and 2) the relatively higher levels of prescribed fire to reduce fuel loadings. These alternatives would maintain a fire return interval suited for each ecological landtype. Alternatives A and B do not establish the protective zones, have relatively low levels of prescribed fire, and are not acceptable because of their relatively high wildfire risks.

Response to Comments: Refer to the FEIS, Appendix A, Section A.5 for comments and responses on the DEIS and Proposed Plan. I will elaborate on comments and responses related to mechanical preparations prior to prescribed fire.

Using prescribed fire properly requires considerable skill. To minimize risk of escape, the fire specialist must evaluate whether ground conditions are suitable for using prescribed fire. In many cases, re-introducing fire into the ecosystem will be a 2-staged process: 1) reducing hazardous fuel loads through mechanical means, and 2) using prescribed fire thereafter to maintain the system. Each site, including the defensible space in the Wildland Urban Interface, will be evaluated for the need of treatments prior to using prescribed fire.

Some commenters expressed concern over the width of the WUI zone, suggesting that ¼-mile would be too wide. The amount of the WUI that receives treatments depends on site-specific information of ground conditions. We will rely on the expertise of fire specialists to help determine what conditions are necessary to control risks of catastrophic wildfires. Public opportunities to participate in the decisions on treatments in the WUI will be provided through the NEPA process.

Issue #5: Access and Issue #6: Local Communities

The responses to these issues are linked and will be discussed together.

Overview: The key interests for these issues are: 1) how do local communities and governments, and state and federal agencies collaborate to sustain the special attributes of an area, including managing the processes of land adjustments and special uses, and 2) what is the balance between providing motorized access and protection of natural resources?

The CNF lies within the counties of Craven, Carteret and Jones, and occupies about 15 percent of the counties' land base. The mix and types of residents offers a challenge to create a shared sense of place for the area. Long-term residents, new residents, seasonal, and the transient Marine Corps populations tend to view the local area in vastly different ways. To bring an awareness of the special cultural and environmental attributes of the area requires a collaborative effort.

The CNF provides green space for the local communities and offers easy access to natural environments. However, there may be too much access since there are many short spurs off the main roads where trash dumping and illegal shooting are occurring.

Criteria: My criteria for addressing this issue are: 1) collaborate with local communities and governments, other federal and state agencies to create a shared vision about the cultural and environmental attributes that make this area special, and 2) work with local area residents to determine which spurs to close, with priority on closing those where dumping is occurring, 3) be responsive to comments on the DEIS and Proposed Plan.

Evaluation: For the first criterion, the alternatives do not show a wide variation. The alternatives do evaluate the numbers of jobs and expected income into the local communities resulting from CNF management. While this is helpful to local communities, it does not assure collaboration on sustaining the special cultural and environmental attributes. Therefore, the strategy of collaboration would be part of any alternative selected. The discussion on sustaining local communities is part of the final plan (Plan, Section 2.7).

The amount of road closures varies by alternative (FEIS, Table 2.9). More roads are closed in Alternatives B (over 50 miles) and C than are required to address this issue. Alternatives A, D, and E allow for a modest, reasonable amount of future closures, that seem to fit with the culture of the local area.

Responsive to Comments: Refer to the FEIS, Appendix A, Section A.6 and A.7 for comments and responses on the DEIS and Proposed Plan. I will elaborate on comments and responses related to land adjustments.

There were several comments relating to the need for linking Marine Corp Base at Camp Lejeune, Holly Shelter, Hoffman Forest, Marine Corp Air Station at Cherry Point and the CNF. With the rapid urbanization taking place, collaborations with other federal, state and local governments, local businesses and other interest groups to balance the rate of urbanization and sustaining natural environments are paramount. Therefore, I encourage the Forest Supervisor to engage in initiatives that take a regional approach to natural resource conservation, and to use these efforts as guides for land adjustment decisions.

Conclusion: I believe Alternative E sets the framework for future decisions better than any other alternative because it:

- Includes reasonable strategies to implement endangered species recovery plans, particularly for RCW;
- Restores habitats at a pace where we can monitor and make adjustments in a timely manner;
- Uses natural processes to restore or maintain habitat wherever possible, such as using prescribed fire rather than mechanical or chemical treatments;
- When restoring longleaf pine, considers the development of the understory as well as the overstory system by using less intensive site preparation methods;

- Assures habitats are adequate to support trends for MIS species;
- Develops strategies for sustaining rare communities and species by providing special interest areas as a refuge;
- Increases water based recreation opportunities in areas with least impacts to other natural resources;
- Establishes a trail system to accommodate a variety of uses;
- Complies with the criteria of Executive Order 11644 - Use of off road vehicles on the public lands to determine the amount and location of OHV use;
- Allows the closure of unauthorized roads and trails to motorized vehicles;
- Provides a reasonable recommendation of roadless areas for wilderness based on physical, biological, and social needs. The areas recommended involve additions (691 acres) from recent land acquisitions, and will improve the manageability of the existing wilderness areas. The other roadless areas will be managed under management prescriptions that would not change their roadless characteristics;
- Protects outstandingly remarkable values of river corridors eligible for wild and scenic river status. The State of North Carolina, with the Forest Service as a cooperator, would be the appropriate agency to conduct the suitability analyses of these rivers;
- Provides for human health and safety from wildland fire;
- Reduces risks to property and other resources from wildland fire;
- Reduces risks of losing short interval fire adapted ecosystems;
- Emphasizes the collaboration with local communities and governments, other federal and state agencies to create a shared vision about the cultural and environmental attributes that make this area special;
- Provides emphasis to work with local area residents to determine which roads and spurs to close, especially where trash dumping and illegal shooting are occurring;
- Adequately responds to comments on the Draft EIS and Proposed Plan.

Management Concerns

In addition to the planning issues and public comments, the following factors were considered in making my decision:

- Consistency with applicable laws, policies, manual, and handbook direction that govern the development of a Forest Plan and management of national forest lands.
- Promotion of rural economic development and a quality rural environment.
- The effects on the people who use and depend on forest resources.
- Consistency with plans and policies of local, State, and other national government agencies.
- Operational and budget needs to fully implement the Plan decision.

Alternatives

Five alternatives were analyzed in detail in the DEIS. Six are considered in detail in the FEIS, including Alternative E, the Revised Forest Plan. One additional alternative (FEIS,

Chapter 2, Section 2.1) was considered but eliminated from detailed study for reasons given in Chapter 2 of the FEIS. The management theme for each of the alternatives is provided below. A discussion of the environmental effects for the alternatives considered in detail is included in Chapter 3 of the FEIS.

Alternative A

This alternative would continue implementation of the original 1986 Forest Plan, as amended. It serves as a basis for comparison with the other alternatives. Under this alternative, the Forest would be intensively managed to provide a moderate output of commodity resources. Loblolly pine would be favored over longleaf pine on most sites. The RCW recovery would be slower and based on 1989 interim guidelines.

Alternative B

This alternative was developed to address a number of public comments asking for low-impact timber management to restore natural communities, increased emphasis on nature-based recreation activities in remote settings and generally a lighter human hand on the land. Alternative B emphasizes low-impact activities and restoration of natural communities at a slow rate. Natural communities would be restored through uneven-aged management, using the potential natural vegetation predicted by the ecological classification as a basis for desired condition. RCW augmentation efforts would stimulate very slow expansion of the population. Recreation activities would have low impacts.

Alternative C

This alternative addresses public comments desiring rapid longleaf pine restoration; expansion of the existing RCW population; more habitat for black bears, hardwood wetland habitats, and wild turkey; and more fuels management in wildland urban interfaces. Alternative C provides for restoration of natural communities, using a combination of even- and two-aged silvicultural systems. Emphasis is on restoring longleaf pine to sites currently occupied by offsite loblolly pine, with a longleaf pine ecological type. Expansion of RCW populations would be actively pursued. Fuel loadings would be reduced in wildland-urban interfaces and pocosins. Recreation would be primarily nature-based and further development would emphasize the Croatan as a unique natural setting for a variety of recreation opportunities.

Alternative C modified

In this modification of Alternative C, Pond Pine Addition B is proposed for wilderness designation. All other actions and effects are as described above for Alternative C. This new wilderness enlarges the Pond Pine Wilderness to the east and provides linkage around Great Lake to the Sheep Ridge Wilderness to the north and the Pocosin Wilderness to the south. A quarter mile nonwilderness buffer is provided on the north side of the Camp Lejeune Railroad.

Alternative D

This alternative addresses public desires for more human accessibility to, and use of, national forest lands. In Alternative D, maintaining existing forest community types would be the basis for regeneration, and longleaf pine and hardwoods would not be actively restored. The level of RCW population expansion would be slow. Fuels management would be aggressive. Recreation management would emphasize a full range of opportunities. A wide variety of special uses would be accommodated throughout the forest.

Alternative E

This alternative addresses public comments about the preferred alternative in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and the Proposed CNF Revised Plan. The theme of this alternative is similar to Alternative C: strive to restore longleaf pine; expansion of the existing RCW population; enhance habitat for black bears, hardwood wetland habitat, and wild turkey; and more fuels management in wildland-urban interfaces. However, the method of restoring longleaf pine and increasing RCW clusters would change between the alternatives. Alternative E emphasizes two-aged regeneration methods (shelterwood with reserves) over clearcutting in order to retain stand structure for potential RCW nesting trees. One OHV area provides opportunities to meet demands for all terrain vehicles.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated From Detailed Study

During the scoping phase of the NEPA process, some respondents wanted an alternative that eliminated human uses and human induced impacts. No vegetation projects, no prescribed fire, limited recreation uses, no access for off highway vehicles, were a few actions mentioned. This alternative was considered but not studied in detail because this level of management is already described in the Minimum Level Benchmark (see Appendix B, FEIS), it does not address all the issues identified by the public, and it would eliminate most of the multiple uses and benefits for which national forests were created.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The Council on Environmental Quality has defined the “environmentally preferable” alternatives as: “...the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA’s section 101. Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources.”

Alternative B is the environmentally preferable alternative. It would schedule the least amount of timber harvest, associated road development, and involve the least human-induced change to the natural environment. Consequently, of all the alternatives

considered in detail, it would have the fewest adverse human induced effects on the biological and physical environment.

Even though Alternative B is preferable from the standpoint of the physical and biological environment, I believe Alternative E provides for a better balance of resource uses and maximizes the net public benefit while protecting the environment. The Selected Alternative is also more responsive to concerns of local communities for economic stability and achieves a better overall balance of the economic concerns with the environmental issues. Some of the components of Alternative B are incorporated in the Selected Alternative, such as designation of the entire hardwood/cypress ecological landtype to a prescription that protects wetland habitat, designated old-growth areas, and improved recreation opportunities.

Alternative E incorporates appropriate environmental safeguards to minimize potential adverse effects to the biological and physical environment. In addition, this alternative maintains options for the next 10 to 15 years that will allow the Forest to respond to many of the issues addressed in Alternative B. Features of the Selected Alternative such as locating and scheduling longleaf pine restoration efforts to accommodate RCW expansion will allow the Forest to adapt and incorporate new scientific findings over the next 10 years while providing a stable supply of timber for local economic stability. The Selected Alternative provides more flexibility than Alternative B to manage habitats for a variety of wildlife species, including threatened and endangered species, and those which need abundant early successional habitat as well as those that prefer abundant older successional habitat. Also, the Selected Alternative would provide opportunities to improve overall forest health by effectively restoring native plant communities and lessening potential habitat losses to detrimental insects and diseases.

Net Public Benefits

The 1982 National Forest Management Act (NFMA) implementing regulations (36 CFR 219.1) state that forest plans must "...provide for multiple-use and sustained yield of goods and services from the National Forest System in a way that maximizes long-term net public benefits in an environmentally sound manner." Net public benefits can be defined as the overall value to the Nation of all outputs (benefits) and positive effects, less all associated inputs (costs) and negative effects, whether they can be quantitatively valued or not. Therefore, public net benefits have 2 components: priced and non-priced benefits and costs.

Priced benefits and costs: Prices for timber outputs and recreation uses were estimated in the FEIS (Appendix B). The Present Net Value (PNV) was used to measure the economic efficiency of each alternative. A comparison of the alternatives' PNVs, is shown in Table B-18 of the FEIS. All the alternatives fall within 10 percent of the highest PNV, which is Alternative C. Therefore, in terms of priced benefits and costs, the range is fairly narrow among alternatives.

Non-priced benefits and costs: The range among alternatives becomes much wider when non-priced benefits and costs are considered. Some of the important non-priced benefits include ecosystem diversity; restoring habitat for threatened, endangered, or sensitive species; water quality; and scenic quality. The rationale for my decision discloses public net benefits that accrues for the alternatives. For example, the criterion for the rate of restoration of longleaf shows that Alternatives A, B, and D do not provide high public benefits, due to the lack of restoration emphasis. Alternatives C and C-modified provide high net public benefits, however, the rate of restoration is too rapid in the short term and would commit resources without chances for adjustments. Alternative E provides a rate of restoration that provides for additional species habitat, while allowing time to monitor successes or failures. The benefits of balancing the resource flows are non-priced, but real values of society.

I believe that Alternative E provides direction to manage the Forest to produce goods, services, and use opportunities in a way that maximizes net public benefits. Based on the preceding discussions it is clear that Alternative E does not have the least impact on the environment nor does it generate as many market valued commodities as other alternatives considered in the FEIS. However, I believe the Selected Alternative achieves a balance between the economic benefits and environmental issues and concerns voiced by the public. I believe the Selected Alternative will increase public benefits by moving the Forest towards improved forest health through its emphasis on restoring native landscape diversity and through its special attention to providing functioning ecosystems and unique plant and animal habitats. I am also confident that the management direction in the Revised Forest Plan is within the physical and biological capability of the land and can be accomplished without reducing that capability.

Compatibility with Goals of Other Public Agencies and Indian Tribes

The Revised Forest Plan has been developed with public participation that involved coordination and comments from federal, State, and local agencies including the Department of Defense, USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, State of North Carolina Department of Natural Resources, State of North Carolina Department of Parks and Recreation, County Commissions of Craven, Carteret, and Jones Counties.

Environmental Justice

The Selected Alternative would not disproportionately affect minority or low-income populations in the local communities. While some lessening of forest products outputs such as timber volumes would occur, a sustainable mix of goods and services would continue in the long-term.

Implementation Schedules And Budgets

The Revised Forest Plan will be implemented through a series of project-level decisions based on site-specific environmental analysis and public involvement. The Revised Forest Plan seeks to guide determination of management activities and projects by

establishing a clear desired condition for the Forest and for each management prescription and area, rather than by establishing schedules for actions. This approach should leave more flexibility for managers to adapt program and project selection as changes take place in budgets, resource capabilities, and management priorities.

Outputs in the FEIS are projections of probable outcomes. They were used to approximate activities and practices, in order to estimate the likely environmental effects of following the direction provided by the Revised Forest Plan.

The Revised Forest Plan purposefully avoids determining activity schedules. Appendix K contains some estimates of possible outputs, but these are projections for future project planning and budgeting purposes. These estimates do not constitute Plan decisions and Plan amendments are not needed to change these projections.

During implementation, specific projects and activities will be proposed and analyzed. These analyses will be documented in the appropriate NEPA documents, i.e., Environmental Assessments, Environmental Impact Statements, or Categorical Exclusions. Projects, practices, and activities will be designed to achieve the goals, objectives, and desired future conditions (DFCs) described in Chapters 2 and 3 of the Revised Forest Plan.

The Revised Forest Plan may be implemented no sooner than 30 days from the date that the Environmental Protection Agency's Notice of Availability of the FEIS appears in the Federal Register.

Monitoring And Evaluation

The monitoring and evaluation program is the quality-control system for a forest plan. This program is described in Chapter 5, "Monitoring and Evaluation", of the Revised Forest Plan. Monitoring and evaluation is emphasized in this revision and will provide us with information on the progress that we achieve in obtaining management goals and objectives. This information will be evaluated and used to update inventory data, to improve current and future mitigation measures, and to assess the need for amending or revising the Revised Forest Plan. Evaluation of monitoring results is directly linked to the decision maker's ability to respond to changing conditions, emerging trends, public concerns, and new information and technology. No single monitoring item or parameter automatically triggers a change in Revised Forest Plan direction. An interdisciplinary approach is used to evaluate information and decide what changes are needed.

Specific monitoring questions are identified and directly linked to Revised Forest Plan goals, desired future conditions, objectives, standards, and specific regulatory requirements. Not every goal, objective, and standard can be monitored. Relevancy to issues, compliance with legal and agency policy, scientific credibility, administrative feasibility, long- and short-term budget considerations, and impact on work force all influence monitoring priorities.

A range of acceptable approaches has been identified to monitor and evaluate the forestwide status and trends of habitats and populations for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species or for those species selected as management indicator species. One or more of these approaches that can be applied in monitoring a species include: (1) measurement of habitat conditions and trends for species, (2) the use of population occurrence data, (3) the use of population indices to track relative population trends, (4) actual population estimates and demographic information usually reserved for some federally listed species or high risk globally impaired species, and (5) development of research studies to determine species/habitat relationships and species responses to conditions created by land management activities.

Each monitoring question has one or more monitoring items to answer the question. For each monitoring question, a monitoring task sheet has been developed. These task sheets are used to develop the details, priorities, and budgeting for answering the monitoring questions. The task sheets are not part of my decision but are in Appendix L of the Revised Forest Plan for information. Changes to task sheets will not require a Forest Plan amendment.

Public participation is vital as we monitor our progress. We will work with partners and cooperators in developing and carrying out monitoring activities. Activities, findings, and results will be evaluated and reports will be available for the public at least annually. The public may review the results and recommend changes based on monitoring findings, emerging issues or new information.

Mitigation

Mitigation measures are an integral part of the Forestwide standards and management prescription standards listed in the Revised Forest Plan in Chapter 4. These mitigation measures were developed by an interdisciplinary team and contain measures necessary to avoid, minimize, rectify, reduce, eliminate, or compensate for possible adverse environmental effects. Some mitigation measures are incorporated by reference from other documents. These documents include:

- Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement for Vegetation Management in the Coastal Plain/Piedmont (VM ROD)(USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, February 1989), as Supplemented (October 2002)
- Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and its Habitat on National Forests in the Southern Region (RCW ROD)(USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, June 1995)
- Record of Decision, Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Suppression of the Southern Pine Beetle (SPB ROD)(USDA Forest Service, Southern Region, February 1987)

Endangered Species Act Section 7: Consultation

A biological assessment was prepared for the Revised Forest Plan (FEIS, Appendix E). The determination is that the Selected Alternative will “not likely to adversely affect” RCW, rough leaved loosestrife, bald eagle, and American alligator, and will have “no effect” on red wolf, eastern cougar, and sensitive joint vetch. The USDI Fish and Wildlife Service were informally consulted and have concurred with this determination. *(See the concurrence letter from the UDSI Fish and Wildlife Service dated June 14, 2002.)*

Plan Amendments

The Revised Forest Plan is a dynamic instrument that can be changed with appropriate public involvement and environmental analysis. Through the life of the Revised Forest Plan, amendments may be needed to incorporate new information, new policy and direction, or changing values and resource conditions. Amendments will keep the Forest Plan current, relevant, and responsive to agency and public concerns. Amendments are needed whenever any of the Revised Forest Plan decisions should be changed due to any of the above conditions. The Revised Forest Plan also can be amended for specific projects if during project design it is determined that the best method of meeting goals and objectives conflicts with existing standards.

Amendments may be significant or non-significant. The Forest Supervisor may implement non-significant amendments to the Revised Forest Plan after appropriate public involvement and environmental analysis. The Regional Forester approves significant amendments.

Appeal Information

This decision may be appealed in accordance with the provisions of 36 CFR 217 by filing a written notice of appeal within 90 days from the date of publication of the legal notice.

The appeal must be filed with the Reviewing Officer:

Express Mail:

USDA - Forest Service
Attn: EMC, Appeals
201 14th Street, SW
3rd Floor Central
Washington, DC 20024

Regular Mail:

USDA - Forest Service
Attn: EMC, Appeals
Mail Stop 1104
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250-1104

The notice of appeal must include sufficient narrative evidence and argument to show why this decision should be changed or reversed (36 CFR 217.9). Requests to stay the approval of this Land and Resource Management Plan shall not be granted (36 CFR 217.10 (b)).

The Revised Forest Plan will be implemented 30 days after the Notice of Availability of the Forest Plan, the FEIS, and the Record of Decision appear in the Federal Register. All new permits, contracts, and other instruments for the use and occupancy of National Forest System lands and resource uses must conform to the Revised Forest Plan. Permits, contracts, and other instruments that were in existence before implementation will be reviewed (if needed), subject to valid existing rights. No decisions on site-specific projects are made in this document. Outputs identified in the Revised Forest Plan are only included to indicate an approximate level of activities and practices, and to help estimate effects. Final decisions on site-specific projects will be made after site-specific analysis and documentation in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

Anyone concerned about the Revised Forest Plan or FEIS, or who would like more information is encouraged to contact:

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for 
ROBERT T. JACOBS
Regional Forester
Southern Region, USDA Forest Service

December 20, 2002

Date