

alternatives will be developed by allocating land areas to individual DC's. Notwithstanding the issue to which it responds, each desired condition must incorporate concepts of sustainability and multiple-use resource management principles.

IV. Preliminary Issues

The following preliminary issues were developed from the 10-year review of the current plan and subsequent annual monitoring reports, together with the public and internal response to their findings and from public comments received on project level proposals and from comments made during the earlier 1999 public forest plan scoping. Public comments in response to this notice will help us to determine additional issues and scope of the analysis to be considered.

Forest Health/Sustainability

Sustainable Forest Ecosystem Management is a key component of the Forest Service Natural Resource Agenda. Watersheds are vital to ecosystem health. Healthy watersheds promote healthy forests and sustainable forest ecosystems. The revised Forest Plan will incorporate Forest Service policy to restore and maintain healthy watersheds for use by current and future generations.

Forest Health and Sustainability topics include:

- Forest biological diversity.
- Native forest ecosystem restoration and maintenance.
- Forest Health, especially protection from insects and diseases.
- Prescribed fire's role for residual fuels reduction as well as its role for managing ecosystems will be expanded.
- Old growth.
- Protection of riparian areas.
- Streamside zone management.
- Control or eradication of noxious weeds occurring on national forest lands.
- Management of special interest areas.

Vegetation Management

The harvest and regeneration of timber-producing trees have always been a central issue in national forest planning. Over the life of the current Forest Plan, timber has generally ranked as the second most valuable agricultural corps in the State of Mississippi. This preliminary issue assumes additional significance because of its impact on other resources, such as recreation and wildlife. Not surprisingly, forest regeneration and timber harvest were the subject of more review comments than any others. Public comments

received on the 10-year Review of the Land and Resource Management Plan expressed support for timber harvests to continue at current or higher levels and others objected to the level. Individuals and organizations involved in the timber industry or local government have expressed concern about the impact of national forest timber harvests on local economies, particularly on employment and the 25% returns to counties for roads and schools. The average actual timber volume sold on the National Forests in Mississippi was just over 80% of the amount planned for fiscal years 1985 through 1995.

However, declines in harvest levels have occurred over the last several years causing concern for individuals and organizations involved in the timber industry and local government officials concerned about declining revenues.

Vegetation Management focuses on:

- Lands suitable for timber production.
- Relationship of timber harvest levels to local economies and jobs.
- Silvicultural systems and how they affect sustainability and forest health.
- Hardwood management within pine stands.
- Mixed pine management.
- Alternative forest products, such as pine straw raking and removal.
- Role of herbicide use in forest management.

Threatened, Endangered, Proposed and Sensitive Species Management

Red-Cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) Decisions. The Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Management of the Red-cockaded Woodpecker and its Habitat on National Forests in the Southern Region (RCW/EIS) was issued in June of 1995. The RCW/EIS contains direction to revise previous management practices, standards, and guidelines, and its Record of Decision (ROD) instructs affected forests to incorporate the new direction into their Forest Plan, through revision or amendment. The RCW/EIS ROD also includes an amendment (number 14) to the current Forest Plan for the National Forests in Mississippi which is designed to bridge the gap until the Forest Plan revision can be accomplished. Toward that end, Amendment 14 designates tentative RCW Habitat Management Areas (HMAs) and tentative population objectives. It also continues the interim standards, adopted in 1990, for areas within $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile of active and inactive RCW clusters. For areas within the tentative HMAs but outside the $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile circles, current Forest Plan standards and guidelines remain in effect with the exception that silvicultural methods and

practices are limited. Available options include thinning, two-aged shelterwood, and uneven-aged management by either single-tree or group-selection methods. Clearcutting is allowed only to restore Longleaf or other desirable native pines to appropriate sites occupied by species less suitable for RCW.

The revised Forest Plan must establish final HMA boundaries and population objectives. The RCW/EIS Record of Decision established tentative HMAs on 367,169 acres on the Bienville, De Soto, Chickasawhay, and Homochitto Ranger Districts. The accompanying tentative population goal is 1,595 active clusters. As of 2002, the forest's total number of active clusters was 187. Additionally, the Forest Plan revision must incorporate the management practices, standards, and guidelines in the RCW Record of Decision Appendix A and in the revised RCW recovery plan. The HMAs and population objectives are subject to some modification. In addition, opportunities will be examined to expand existing HMAs or create additional HMAs. Any changes to HMAs require analysis beyond that contained in the RCW/EIS as well as a favorable opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service obtained through formal consultation.

Other Threatened and Endangered Species

Management for other proposed, endangered, threatened, and sensitive (PETS) species will also require consideration during plan revision. Recovery plans for the affected species are developed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and their prescribed conservation and protection measures will be incorporated in forest management activities. The Forest Service will continue efforts to conserve PETS species and their habitats.

Proposed, endangered, threatened, and sensitive species management facets to be addressed during plan revision include:

- Develop management practices (actions) that promote (sustain) viable populations of proposed, endangered, threatened, and sensitive species and their habitats occurring on national forest lands.

- Determine how much of the National Forests in Mississippi's land base will be allocated to red-cockaded woodpecker management (Habitat Management Areas) and what effect such allocation will have on other resource management options.