

Cherokee National Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative Meeting

Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Morristown, Tennessee

Steering Committee Meeting Notes

Thursday, November 10th, 2011

9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Committee Members Attending: Josh Kelly, at large; Danny Osborne, Tennessee Division of Forestry; Dwight King, Logging Company/Sullivan County Commissioner; Dennis Daniel, National Wild Turkey Federation; Steve Henson, Southern Multiple Use Council; Mark Shelley, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition; Parker Street, Ruffed Grouse Society; Joe McGuinness, Cherokee National Forest (CNF); Catherine Murray, Cherokee Forest Voices; John Gregory, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency; Katherine Medlock, The Nature Conservancy; Terry Porter, Tennessee Forestry Association; Geoff Call, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Staff Attending: Karen Firehock, facilitator; Melinda Holland, facilitator; Steve Simon; consultant.

Observers Attending: Leslie Avriemmo, Cherokee National Forest (CNF); Terry Bowerman, CNF; Stephanie Medlin, CNF; Don Palmer, CNF; Mark Healey, CNF; Tom Speaks, CNF; Alex Wyss, TN TNC; Linda Ordiway, Ruffed Grouse Society; Sarah Francisco, Southern Environmental Law Center.

Karen Firehock began the meeting with introductions of the committee members and the observers, and reviewed the meeting agenda and groundrules.

Observer Comments:

Sarah Francisco, SELC, thanked the Committee for the extended public comment period on the draft recommendations. SELC is pleased with committee's progress, supports this initiative, and finds that the draft recommendations are very good overall. SELC views it as important that the recommendations are grounded in the best scientific information and they feel this has been achieved. She noted that their comments list specific things they would like to see addressed or changed in the report, or addressed at the project level in the future. They look forward to next steps of implementing recommendations and seeing restoration-based management in the forest.

Agenda Item 1 – Old Growth Draft Language

This topic was discussed at the last committee meeting. Draft report language regarding old growth was circulated to the committee after the last meeting and some concerns were raised about the language by committee members, so the language was added to the agenda to re-review at this meeting. The language drafted since last meeting was: "At a watershed level, the Forest Service should give preference to harvesting younger stands, avoiding those stands within 10 years of the Region 8 Old Growth age criteria when possible. This setback should only be in place for the 20 year planning horizon of this document."

The committee member proposing the additional language re-explained why he proposed this addition to the report. He explained that people view forest restoration along a spectrum ranging from humans should control forests through management to those who favor allowing forests to be self-regenerating. Those who favor self

regeneration also favor increased amounts of old growth forest and believe that the amount of old growth is currently below the Natural Range of Variability (NRV) for all forest types (perhaps with exception of one oak type). The proposed draft recommendation only relates to Montane Red Chestnut Oak and Dry Mesic Oak. Following the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Region 8 Old Growth Guidance age criteria of 120 years is desirable. The proposed language includes a statement of preference to avoid harvesting stands within 10 years of the Region 8 Old Growth Guidance 120 year age criteria. He said that based on the data on oak forest types in CNF probably only 8,000 acres of new areas would potentially move into old growth under his proposal. Another committee member noted that the proposed language would not completely prohibit harvest during that 10 year setback period, as it is stated as a preference to protect those stands. Other committee members expressed support for the addition of this language.

A CNF representative noted that 60% of the forest is currently not suitable for timber harvest, so that percentage will be going towards old growth. A committee member countered that the designation of what is "unsuitable" can change somewhat based on the current forest plan, except for wilderness areas. In response to a question on what is available for harvest, Steve Simon noted that 24,000 acres (7%) of CNF is currently in wilderness. Currently CNF has 7% old growth in inventory and the main age class in CNF is 70-80 years. He also stated that old growth is rare and has a large number of species dependent on this habitat, thus he feels these stands would be the most controversial to propose to cut.

Some committee members stated that they cannot support adding the draft statement as written to the report. The areas unsuitable for timber harvest become a defacto expansion of the amount of old growth. They have no problem with old growth in the forest, and past a certain age a tree is not suitable for harvest. The amount of acres positioned to move into that age class plus the unsuitable acres results in too much of the forest moving into "old growth." Old growth is a buffet table for pests and pathogens, which will create early successional as result, but also has negative impacts on viewsheds, recreation, and other uses. The forest plan is not likely to change regarding the unsuitable acres in CNF even if done by cable or helicopter logging.

A committee member noted that whether this draft statement is included in the report or not, the controversy around forest stands which are close to old growth will remain. They further stated that the committee wants CNF to go after the low hanging fruit which are the uncharacteristic classes, which should have little controversy about harvest, and those trees are likely more valuable to harvest than old growth.

An observer commented that the only reason to cut old growth classes would be for pest or disease management. A committee member noted that that the USFS needs to retain the ability to manage for pests or pathogens in old growth areas. A question was raised as to whether the 8 Guidance allowed or prohibited cutting old growth to address pathogens or insects and it was found not to prohibit this.

Given the differences of opinion expressed by committee members, they discussed developing a more general statement about value of old growth and why it should be protected when possible on the landscape. This approach would avoid 10 year setback language and defer to the project scale for decisions about what to protect for old growth and what to harvest.

After some discussion the committee agreed on the addition of the following language to their report: *"In order to protect the value of old growth forests at the watershed level, the USFS should give preference to harvesting stands in the over-abundant mid and late age classes, and the R8 guidance should be adhered to."* The committee also agreed on the need for new preamble language in the report on the values of old growth. Josh Kelly volunteered to draft this language and Katherine Medlock will propose where it could go in the document. This language will be circulated to the committee for review.

Agenda Part 2 – Review Public Comments

The committee received a large number of public comments on the draft recommendations. The comment period closed on November 11th at midnight, thus the committee anticipated receiving additional comments after this meeting. Ms. Firehock noted that she would send any comments received on Nov. 11 to the committee for their consideration. The group agreed to review comments received to date, at this meeting to decide if they need to explain that Committee has already considered the concern and how it was addressed; or whether the committee needs to have further discussion on the comment to decide how to address it. Discussion on comments and possible revisions to the recommendations will be held at the December 5th committee meeting. For the majority of the November 10th meeting, the committee reviewed each comment and decided if it needs explanation or further discussion and possibly a revision to the recommendations report language.

Action items which flowed from the discussion of public comments included:

- Draft an explanation of the value of old growth and other successional stages - Josh Kelly
- Write proposed definition of U B Gone for the report - Katherine Medlock
- Write language to clarify that the committee's goal was to focus on where active management is needed; but acknowledge the value of passive management in many areas - Katherine Medlock
- Draft clarifying language for the uncharacteristic vegetation section of report regarding the need for active management to get desired species to come back after removal of uncharacteristic vegetation - Steve Simone and Terry Porter
- Draft an explanation (for a committee response to comments letter) on the nature of timber treatments proposed for some of the restoration activities in the recommendations report – Steve Simon
- Include Steve Simon's methodology report as an appendix to the committee's recommendations report.
- Draft explanation about how biophysical settings (BPS) is describing pre settlement conditions – Katherine Medlock
- Draft revisions to explain recommendations on adaptive management and monitoring to test the results of restoration - Katherine Medlock
- Draft a statement explaining that the committee took a landscape scale approach but recognizes the species specific concerns which are not captured at this scale, but will be addressed at the project scale
- Draft an explanation (for a committee response to comments letter) on ecological systems and Landfire definitions – Steve Simon
- Compile all comments the committee listed as needing "explanation" or "discussion," noting where the committee suggested that further clarification will be needed in the report as opposed to only in the response to comments document – Karen Firehock and Melinda Holland
- Before the December 5th meeting, committee members are welcome to suggest additional issues raised in the public comments that require new/modified language in the recommendations - Committee
- Begin drafting a shell document of responses to comments, filling in obvious answers and flag where committee members help is needed with drafting – Karen Firehock and Melinda Holland

The committee agreed to draft a single response document that summarizes and addresses all comments received. This document will be posted on the committee's web site and sent to those who commented.

Reflections about the CNFLRI Process

During their lunch break each committee member shared their background, thoughts and appreciation regarding the CNFLRI process. Several members noted that although the project required two years of their time and for many the work was done as a volunteer (unpaid service) they felt that they needed to ensure that the Cherokee Forest could be healthy now and for generations to come. They expressed their appreciation to the Forest Service and to TNC for helping make this collaborative process possible, as well as to the facilitation team for keeping things on track. They also noted that new relationships and trust had been built with the committee through many hours of hard work and they looked forward to seeing the fruits of their work in a restored and resilient Cherokee Forest. Then Tom Speaks, CNF Forest Supervisor, also shared reflections on the process, noted his appreciation for the committee member's passion for the forest and taking considerable time for this committee process. He thanked the group for their hard work over the past two years and provided them with a plaque to each member for their service. He stated that he is proud of all of the members and their efforts to produce an excellent draft report and he looked forward to getting the work implemented.

Watershed Proposal Presentation

Katherine Medlock gave a short presentation on TNC's proposal to convene a subgroup of this committee as a watershed team to test out the implementation of the report's ideas at the watershed scale. She noted that at last meeting, several members favored Paint creek watershed as a project site. This topic will be discussed further at the December 5th committee meeting. Ms. Medlock suggested that all meetings of the watershed team be open to the public and also encourage the USFS to hold an inclusive public involvement process during its part of the watershed planning process. The USFS started its watershed assessment process in October and will complete their analysis by the end of the fiscal year – thus the watershed team will need to provide final input to USFS by summer 2012. Ms. Medlock suggested that the USFS staff need to attend watershed team meetings to promote dialogue and information exchange on how to implement the committee's recommendations at the watershed project scale and to coordinate work flows. She noted that this is the only watershed where this group will have so much involvement so the USFS needs to learn during this project about what is desired in implementation of the report's recommendations. A USFS representative explained the proposed schedule including initial review will begin in January and include assessment of information, identify information gaps, fill in these gaps, then develop a list of opportunities for that watershed. Mrs. Medlock recommend that the watershed team hold its 1st meeting in January 2012. At the December 5th committee meeting the group needs to decide which watershed to focus on, confirm who wants to be on the watershed team, set the first meeting date and location. She also noted that the group would follow a self-evaluation process at the beginning to determine what interests may be missing, such as local watershed groups, and then add those new members to the committee.

Next Meeting: December 5th Committee (9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) meeting to be held at Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency in Morristown, Tennessee. The meeting will review the public comments flagged for discussion and determine how to address them.