

Nettle Patch plans undergo changes

by JENAY TATE • EDITOR AND PUBLISHER



With the comment period closing today on a draft environmental analysis, officials in the U.S. Forest Service's Clinch District say the office has worked hard to be inclusive and responsive to concerns about its Nettle Patch vegetation management plan.

This was a second opportunity for public comment and not required, Shelby Williams, silvaculturist, timber management assistant and Nettle Patch project manager, pointed out in a recent interview.

By policy, they were not obligated to do so, Clinch District Ranger Barry Garten said, but "I wanted to give the community an opportunity to read through and make comments before we went out with the final draft."

In the coming weeks, Garten said, his office will be putting together the final draft and developing a draft decision based on public input and USFS analysis of the two alternatives — following the proposed path for vegetation management or doing nothing at all.

After that, he said, there will be a 45-day objection period and if there are objections to the decision, then the USFS has to address those. If there are any new concerns, those also will be incorporated into the final environmental analysis.

According to the draft environmental assessment, the Nettle Patch Project is "an integrated forest management project with proposals for road maintenance and reconstruction, wildlife opening creation and enhancement, prescribed fire for site prep, prescribed fire for forest structure improvement and maintenance (all totaling 1455 acres), 1155 acres of stand improvement projects, 976 acres of thinning and 443 acres of regeneration harvest."

Garten and Williams said the draft assessment includes changes that respond both to citizen comments and to additional revelations of their own.

For example, they have made plans for buffers and boundary changes to help mitigate concerns over visual impact of prescribed burns and logging, they explained. They have changed prescriptions and treatments as well, they said, such as converting from more heavily logged regenerations to thinning trees in some areas.

Addressing concerns about old-growth areas, they said, the plan now has no proposed harvest treatments or commercial timber sales in old-growth areas. There will be some of those areas that are part of prescribed, low-intensity burns, however, they said.

Garten said they have met with city of Norton representatives on several occasions about the Nettle Patch proposal in conjunction with viewshed and mountain bike routes around Flag Rock.

"We have come to a pretty good place on that," he said.

Williams added that they put emphasis on assessing the visual concerns and have determined the project "is not going to be visibly intrusive from Flag Rock or Norton or High Knob tower." He said they did computer modeling and site visits "to make sure that any treatments would not stand out."

Primary concerns in Coeburn had to do with potential effects on its nearby alternative water supply from pesticide treatment on invasive non-native species.

Garten said there is a "low, low probability" of pesticides getting into the water supply. He pointed out there is no aerial spraying, with all treatment by direct plant application.

Williams added that pesticides used "would be nothing more harmful than anyone can buy over the counter."

Garten said they also are addressing some new concerns, like with the green salamander, talking to local experts and others to make sure they minimize the impact.

"Harvesting activities near the known locations have been removed from the proposed action," according to the assessment. "The green salamander is not currently a Forest Service sensitive species, however it will be on revised Regional Forester's sensitive species list, which is expected to be finalized in the first half of 2017."

They will:

- Retain trees within 300 feet of a rock feature supporting salamanders.
- Retain trees in a corridor 300 feet wide between rock features supporting salamanders that are within 500 feet of each other.

As the project progresses, sites that "potentially meet certain habitat characteristics will be evaluated for buffering . . . from thinning and regeneration harvests," according to the assessment.

With regard to concerns over how the plan might promote soil erosion or the spread of non-native invasive species, they said the forest service is equally concerned as anyone about those precise conditions.

"We go above and beyond state best management practices," Williams said, while also meeting "all requirements of our own laws as well."

Garten and Williams stress that the plan comes from the perspective of wanting to do what is best for the health of the forest.

Williams said they do what they do so "their grandkids can see the same thing as their grandparents did" in the forest.

ISSUES CONSIDERED

The Nettle Patch draft environmental assessment listed potential issues that had been identified and considered in the final analysis. Among them were that:

- Timber harvesting and temporary road construction would harm biodiversity in general including threatened, endangered, or sensitive species such as the Indiana bat and the James spiny mussel and degrade the habitats they require to exist.
- Timber harvesting and road construction would impact water quality and degrade soil productivity.
- The project could impact the viewshed from a High Knob state scenic byway and proposed treatments would have negative impacts to the intrinsic value of High Knob and Pickem Mountain conservation sites.
- Herbicide applications could impact locally rare plant species, degrade water quality and impact adjacent private property owners.
- Adjacent old growth stands needed to be considered, further studied in the area and protected during implementation activities.
- Timber harvesting, road construction and prescribed burning would aid in the establishment and spread of non-native invasive weeds.
- Nearby wildland fires that have occurred in the past coupled with the cumulative impacts of the 1,455 acres planned for prescribed burning in the proposed action could have negative impacts to wildlife habitat.
- Hauling timber through Ramsey and Clear Creek neighborhoods could have a negative impact on residents.
- Uneven-aged forest management has a more minimalistic impact on forest communities and should be considered for an alternative.
- Consideration should be given to the slopes of the area planned for harvest, specifically those slopes exceeding 35 percent.
- Landslide risks should be examined.
- The project could affect climate change by eliminating a natural carbon sink function that the forest provides. Prescribed burning will release carbon and contribute to emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases.