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Field trip details forest service plans

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Shayne Fields, city of Norton's trails coordinator, at center, asks a question about the proposed Nettle Patch vegetative management project during a field trip the U.S. Forest Service's Clinch Ranger District held Tuesday. KATIE DUNN PHOTO

Remnants of a past commercial logging operation surrounded a small contingency of U.S. Forest Service personnel and others earlier this week as they discussed another proposed vegetative management project on national forest land between Coeburn and Norton.

The U.S. Forest Service's Clinch Ranger District is still accepting public comments about management activities that include wildlife habitat and timber stand improvement projects, timber harvest treatments, southern yellow pine planting, prescribed burning, and non-native invasive plant species control on 7,464 acres — 6,693 acres of national forest land and 771 acres of excluded private land — in Wise County's Nettle Patch area.

Tuesday's daylong field trip offered a snapshot of how some proposed activities will shape the forest's future. Three site visits focused on timber harvest and timber stand improvement initiatives and prescribed burn treatments.



The project's current 30-day public comment period ends next Saturday, April 30. However, Clinch District Ranger Barry Garten said Tuesday there will be another 30-day comment period following the completion of a draft environmental analysis. This report will analyze the effects of proposed management activities and assess whether alternatives might be needed to the initial proposal. Garten hopes to have the analysis completed by mid-June.

TIMBER ACTIVITIES

A majority of Tuesday's trip addressed proposed timber management activities. The group paused for almost an hour at a recent commercial harvested site outside the Nettle Patch project area to discuss topics that included proposed timber harvests and sedimentation/erosion control measures.

The current management proposal calls for conducting 1,505 acres of commercial timber harvests and 1,142 acres of non-commercial stand improvement mid-story/crop tree release activities. Shelby Williams, Clinch Ranger District silviculturist and Nettle Patch project manager, said erosion concerns related to timber harvests have been raised, but he stressed "best management practices" are implemented during these operations. He pointed to water bars — berms created to divert rainwater off skid trails — and vegetative plantings present at the three-year-old harvested site where the group stood as examples of some of these prevention methods.

But Steve Brooks, Clinch Coalition associate director, mentioned that the most pressing erosion concerns arise during active logging operations.

Williams said the agency monitors for these concerns during active logging operations. Russ MacFarlane, a Forest Service forest silviculturist from Roanoke, agreed that the highest runoff risks occur when operations are active, but he also said the agency continues monitoring sites after harvests conclude — within a year of timber sales — and though runoff is visible along skid trails, water bars do help stop it from traveling too far.

Shayne Fields, city of Norton's trails coordinator, also asked about the number of trees that might be left following a typical commercial harvest proposed for the Nettle Patch. Williams said each plot is different and will require different treatment approaches. More trees might be left following a harvest

on one site and less on another site. MacFarlane noted, however, that from what he's read of the Nettle Patch proposal, generally a "heavier residual stock" — trees that remain after merchantable trees have been removed — will be left.

Dave Skinner, natural resource specialist for the Clinch Ranger District, also mentioned that these earlier successional habitats — more open forests that contain more grasses and shrubs — are important for certain game and non-game wildlife, including turkey, deer, and grouse.

Responding to a question from Brooks, Williams explained that the amount of early successional habitat desired is site-dependent. No early successional habitat plots currently exist in the Nettle Patch management areas where this habitat type is desired, he added. The proposal notes that a majority of the plots in these areas are late successional habitats.

Other non-commercial timber management techniques meant to aid certain tree species' survival, such as oak, were also discussed. Also noted were concerns about how proposed management activities would impact potential old-growth tree stands. Brooks voiced this concern on Tuesday, and the Clinch Coalition issued a formal press release Wednesday that contained similar concerns. Coalition members toured sections of the project's proposed timber management areas last weekend, including a site off state route 704 near the turn for Bark Camp Lake where a 40-acre shelterwood harvest — a technique defined by Clemson University's Cooperative Extension Office as involving "any regeneration cutting under the protection (overhead or side) of some old trees" — is proposed. The Coalition notes concerns that a timber harvest at this site — a 91-year-old stand of hickory, white and northern red oak species — could impact tourism pursuits since the area serves as the entrance to the national forest and to Bark Camp Lake. "We believe they should withdraw this stand from their proposed management plan," said Coalition President Diana Withen. "We are working with many other groups to promote tourism in this area and this goes directly against that." The group toured several other proposed harvest sites, including three stands each aged 126 years and totaling a combined 103 acres along Forest Service Road No. 2020. Two of the sites are slated for shelterwood harvests, with thinning slated for the third. The Coalition is also requesting the Forest Service avoid management activities in these areas because of the stands' ages "and the need for more old-growth areas."

The Forest Service has not yet conducted an old-growth survey, and Williams said Tuesday that current stand ages are based on a dominant tree the agency has identified as being representative of most of the trees' ages within that stand. MacFarlane added that in some areas that have different aged trees, the age that is most representative for that stand might not be the oldest tree.



In an interview Thursday, Williams said defining old-growth forests is dependent upon multiple factors, including age. “It’s a very sensitive subject to a lot of people and part of the problem is defining old-growth because there are so many different definitions from individuals and even professionals, and it’s hard to define so many different values out there.” There is a protocol for defining old-growth stands in the Jefferson National Forest, but Williams said this doesn’t necessarily mean management activities won’t occur in those areas. It depends on the forest community type, and Williams cited, as an example, a fire-adapted old-growth stand that might need prescribed burning to thrive.

PRESCRIBED BURNING

The agency’s plan to initiate prescribed burning across 1,455 acres was also discussed. The management proposal states the activity will primarily assist yellow pine potential regeneration, maintain a yellow pine forest type, and improve wildlife habitat. Prescribed burns are controlled, low-intensity fires used to manage a landscape. Tuesday’s field trip included a site visit in the Flatwoods section of the county outside the Nettle Patch project area where prescribed burning has occurred and is proposed to occur again. The area, near the Guest River Gorge, totals 1,500 acres and has been burned at different intervals and intensities for more than a decade, according to Terry Adams, fire management officer for the Clinch Ranger District.

Williams explained that some tree species, such as shortleaf pine, are fire dependent, meaning burning can better help the species survive. “Throughout the south, shortleaf pine has reduced substantially,” and when there is an opportunity to “regenerate a forest type that is coming off the landscape that has ecological benefits, we should try to do what we can to ensure it’s on the landscape for as long as possible because it’s serving a function that won’t be there if it (the species) goes away.” Burning also benefits oak regeneration, he said, which is another targeted goal of the plan.

Adams also said fire was once a more frequent and natural component of local forests. Also noted was the potential for stronger, more destructive wildfires without prescribed burning, since the activity helps reduce the amount of fuel — leaf litter, wood, and other combustible materials — present on the forest floor.

MORE INFORMATION

If interested in learning more about the Forest Service's Nettle Patch project, copies of the proposed plan can be obtained by calling Williams at 276/679-8370, ext. 237. Comments can be submitted by phone, letter, email or in person.

Additionally, Williams said Tuesday that he and Garten want to continue collaborations fostered through the Nettle Patch project. A stakeholder group will be established to continue discussions about future forest management activities on the Clinch District, and Garten said he hopes to involve a variety of perspectives, including industry, non-governmental organizations, and communities. The district spans four Virginia counties — Wise, Dickenson, Lee and Scott — and two Kentucky counties — Letcher and Pike. “It’s important to have these conversations,” said Garten. “It helps me gain a better idea from the community as far as forest management.”

