



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

April 2014



Decision Memo

Big Green Mountain Prescribed Burn Unit

Nantahala Ranger District, Nantahala National Forest
Jackson County, North Carolina

For Additional Information Contact:

**Nantahala Ranger District
90 Sloan Road
Franklin, North Carolina 28734
(828) 524-6441**

Decision

I have decided to add the Big Green Mountain unit in Jackson County to the Nantahala Ranger District's prescribed burn rotation. This unit comprises 497 acres of National Forest System land on the east side of Panthertown Valley. The area will be repeatedly burned on a two to five year rotation schedule. This decision is expected to be valid for two burning cycles or up to ten years. The decision will be reviewed before the second burning cycle to ensure that conditions have not changed and that there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the action. Treatments will be conducted during the dormant season of the year between October 15 and April 15. Burning of this unit will require constructing approximately 3,200 feet of hand line on the east side of the treatment unit. Crews will utilize a short segment of hiking trail and creeks to contain the burn on the north, west, and south sides. Qualified personnel will conduct the prescribed burns, operating with approved burn plans. Personnel will patrol control lines during and after ignition to ensure proper containment of the fire.

Reasons for Categorical Exclusion of Project

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment when they are within one of the categories identified in the Code of Federal Regulations 36 CFR 220, and when there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the proposed action. This project is excluded under 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6) *Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction.*

a. Federally listed endangered or threatened species, designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or area proposed as critical habitat, and regionally sensitive (S) species:

A biological evaluation completed on August 15, 2013 determined that the action will have no effect on any federally threatened or endangered species. Concurrence from the US Fish and Wildlife Service was not required for this project.

This project may impact individuals but will not lead toward federal listing or a loss of viability across the forest for the following regionally sensitive species: pink-shell azalea (*Rhododendron vaseyi*), Santeetlah dusky salamander (*Desmognathus santeetlah*), southern Appalachian salamander (*Plethodon teyahalee*), cave spider (*Nesticus silvanus*), Diana fritillary (*Speyeria diana*), divergent melanoplus (*Melanoplus divergens*), northern bush katydid (*Scudderia septentrionalis*), eastern small-footed bat (*Myotis leibii*), and southern water shrew (*Sorex palustris punctulatus*). There will be no impact on any other regional forester's sensitive species.

This project may impact individuals but will not lead toward federal listing or a loss of viability across the forest for the southern Appalachian purple pitcherplant (*Sarracenia purpurea var. montana*), northern peatmoss (*Sphagnum capillifolium*), orange peatmoss (*Sphagnum subsecundum*), tree-ground pine (*Dendrolycopodium dendroideum*), (*Aneides aeneus*), seepage salamander (*Desmognathus aeneus*), cave spider (*Nesticus* sp. 1), dusky azure (*Celastrina nigra*), Baltimore checkerspot (*Euphydryas phaeton*), decorated

melanoplus (*Melanoplus decoratus*), dwarf proud globe (*Patera clarki clarki*), ribbed striate (*Striatura exigua*), and coal skink (*Eumeces anthracinus*). There will be no impacts to any other forest concern species.

b. Floodplains, wetlands, or municipal watersheds:

None are located in the project area.

c. Congressionally designated areas, such as wilderness, wilderness study areas, or national recreation areas:

None are located in the project area.

d. Inventoried roadless areas (IRAs):

The project area does not include any IRAs

e. Research natural areas (RNAs):

The project area does not include any RNAs

f. American Indian and Alaska Native religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, or historic properties or areas:

An archeological review completed on September 3, 2013 determined that the project is an Exempt Undertaking.

Purpose and Need for the Action

The Big Green Mountain prescribed burn unit consists of upland hardwoods with some table mountain pine. The burn treatment will assist in the restoration of table mountain pine which serves an important niche. Due to aggressive wildfire suppression and the absence of prescribed burning over the last 50 to 100 years, these fire adapted ecological zones have missed one or more fire return intervals and are departing from their natural species composition and condition. In the absence of fire disturbance, the vegetation on certain east, south, and west facing drier slopes in the project area is increasing in density and canopy cover. Understory and midstory vegetation is more abundant and shifting toward more shade tolerant species such as rhododendron (*Rhododendron maximum*), mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), and eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*). Regeneration of fire adapted species such as oak (*Quercus spp.*), hickory (*Carya spp.*), and shortleaf pine (*Pinus echinata*) is decreasing. Grasses, forbs and soft mast species are also becoming more limited. The desired objective of this project is to promote fire adapted species and to improve ecosystem functionality.

The purpose and need for the proposed treatments include:

- Reducing understory density of shade tolerant and fire intolerant species such as mountain laurel, red maple and white pine to allow for regeneration of native fire tolerant species;
- Improving wildlife habitat by increasing the availability and quality of nutritious forage for grazing and browsing animals such as deer, turkey, and bear;
- Establishing burn units in a mosaic pattern to mimic natural fire behavior;
- Reducing fuel loading in the burn units to better protect national forest and adjacent ownerships from wildfire;
- Restoring some shortleaf and table mountain pine stands where appropriate.

Scoping and Public Involvement

Providing public notice and identifying issues important to the public - - the scoping process - - was conducted in the spring of 2013 during public meetings to discuss prescribed burning in the Panthertown Valley. During the meeting, members of the public responded to the proposal to add Big Green Mountain to the Nantahala Ranger District prescribed burning rotation. Responses ranged from favorable to opposed.

Findings Required by Other Laws

Forest Plan Consistency – The actions in this decision are consistent with the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests and all amendments to the Forest Plan.

Endangered Species – Implementing the actions in this decision will not affect threatened or endangered species, or result in loss of any other species’ viability, or create significant trends towards Federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act.

Cultural Resources – the actions in this decision will not adversely affect any sites listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural or historic resources.

Notice, Comment, and Appeal Opportunities

These actions are not subject to legal notice and opportunity to comment (36 CFR 215.4(a)). This decision is not appealable (36 CFR 215.12(f))

/s/ Mike Wilkins

April 2, 2014

MICHAEL L. WILKINS
District Ranger
Nantahala Ranger District

Date