United States Department of Agriculture | Forest Service | George Washington and Jefferson National Forests | North River Ranger District
401 Oakwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22801

**Date: July 09, 2015**

Dear Interested Party:

The North River Ranger District of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests (Forest) is initiating scoping for the proposed Elkhorn prescribed burn and is requesting your input in the process in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act.

The Elkhorn burn unit is approximately 1,012 acres of National Forest land and is located on Elkhorn Mountain which is located in Augusta County, four miles southwest of Stokesville, VA. This project occurs within Management Areas 7E1 and 7E2, Dispersed Recreation.

**Background**

The George Washington and Jefferson National Forests are dependent of fire to remain healthy and to provide optimal habitat for a diversity of plants and animals. Wildlife populations such as white-tailed deer, black bears, turkey, quail, squirrels, eastern cottontails and many migratory birds benefit from forest openings and increased food and cover that flourish after a fire. Without periodic ground-level fires, shade loving species like red maple and white pine will out compete oak and pine seedlings for available food and light. Without fire, a pine or oak-hickory forest becomes a different forest over time; one dominated by maples, white pines and other species which would reduce critical habitat for many wildlife species.

Fire has played a major role in shaping vegetation communities in the Appalachian Mountains for thousands of years. Recent research on fire-scarred trees on the Forest and elsewhere in the Appalachians have found that fires occurred periodically, often every 3-9 years, dating back to the mid- 1600's. Similarly, soil charcoal records show that fire has been a part of this region for at least 10,000 years. Lightning caused some fires, whereas Native Americans intentionally set others to help open the forest understory, which increased plant diversity, improved browse for wildlife and made travelling easier. Early European settlers continued to use fire to shape their surroundings, for clearing land and to provide forage for grazing livestock and improved habitat for wildlife.

However, after the turn of the 20th century, the number of people in this region significantly increased and fires began to be perceived as destructive. As a result, state and federal agencies aggressively suppressed fires. The subsequent absence of fire over the past century has transformed the surrounding forests. There are fewer grasses and forbs, there are more fire sensitive shrubs and trees, and the total number of trees per acre is uncharacteristically high.

*Existing Conditions:*

This project area is comprised primarily of the Oak Forests and Woodlands and Pine Forests and Woodlands ecosystems. This unit has previously been burned in 2005 and 2009. These burns have created small gaps in the canopy on the south and west aspects of the unit and have reduced the shrub layer across the unit.

Oak Forests and Woodlands cover approximately 75 percent of this burn unit. The over-story is dominated by red oak, white oak, chestnut oak, black oak and scarlet oak. Heath shrubs such as blueberry, huckleberry and mountain laurel are common in the understory and often form a dense shrub layer. Approximately 10 percent of this ecosystem has an open canopy and there are only a few areas with any native grasses.

Pine Forests and Woodlands cover approximately 25 percent of this burn unit and primarily occupy ridge tops and south and west aspects. The over-story is dominated by table mountain pine and pitch pine along with chestnut oak, scarlet oak, and bear oak. A dense heath shrub layer comprised of mountain laurel, fetterbush, blueberry, and huckleberry is almost always present. There are a few native grasses and sedges found in this ecosystem and approximately 15 percent of this ecosystem currently has an open canopy.

*Desired Condition:*

In the Oak Forests and Woodlands ecosystem, approximately 4 percent of the unit should be in open grassland, 22 percent in an early successional stage with an open canopy, 50 percent in a mid-late successional stage with an open canopy, and 24 percent in a mid to late successional stage with a closed canopy.

In the Pine Forests and Woodlands ecosystem, approximately 13 percent of the system should be regenerating forests, 27 percent mid-successional open canopy, 54 percent late successional open canopy, and 6 percent mid to late successional closed canopy. Native grasses and sedges should be common along with dry site herbs and forbs.

These conditions would provide improved habitat for many species of wildlife including deer, turkey, grouse and many migratory songbirds as well as many rare and declining species. In order to achieve these desired future conditions, a mosaic of over-story removal would need to be an objective for each burn on this unit.

**Purpose and Need**

On this unit there is a need to create a mosaic of diverse habitats for plants and animals, thin crowded forests, provide food for many species of wildlife, and reduce hazardous fuels adjacent to the Staunton Reservoir. This can be accomplished through a series of prescribed burns. The proposed action will move the area closer to desired conditions described in the 2014 Revised Land Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). The need is tied to the overarching purpose to

re-establish the historic fire regime and restore native ecosystems through the use of prescribed fire with the goal of reaching the desired conditions within 20 years.

*The following objectives have been discussed for this project:*

- Firefighter and public safety.
- Decrease canopy cover in both ecosystems in order to increase sunlight to the forest floor which would promote grasses, shrubs, and wildflowers. This would increase food sources and cover for small mammals, songbirds, and important game species.
- Promote fire-dependent and fire-adapted species and restore open oak and pine woodlands. Competition from thin barked species such as maples, tulip poplar and white pine would be reduced which would enhance habitat for species which produce nuts and berries.

**Proposed Action**

Safety of the public and fire personnel would be our primary concern during this prescribed burn.

Prescribed fire is proposed to accomplish restoration objectives and mimic the fires historically found in the Appalachian Mountains. Typically these burns occur in the spring, summer or fall when the fuel moistures are low enough to carry the fire, however, depending on the seasonal weather; these conditions may be present at any time of the year. Ignition of the unit could be executed through both aerial and hand firing methods. The ignition patterns would be planned to foster low to moderate fire intensity by igniting the uphill areas first, thus creating a backing fire to minimize scorching of over-story trees; however, scattered patches of over-story killed trees are expected to occur. Existing firelines and roads and would be used, no new line construction is proposed. Dead trees that pose safety or holding concerns along the unit boundaries would be felled or lined prior to implementation.

In order to improve and restore these habitats, prescribed burning would be carried out over several years, and would include appropriate fire return intervals, seasonality, and fire intensity. A prescribed fire burn plan would be completed for this area prior to implementation. This tactical implementation plan would specify parameters, such as weather and fuel conditions, that must be observed before and during implementation. The burn plan also includes resource coordination requirements. These coordination requirements include provisions for public and firefighter safety, contingency plans for escaped fire, notifications of appropriate agencies and persons, smoke management guidelines to ensure compliance with air quality regulations, and mop-up and patrol procedures. Smoke would be visible, particularly from Staunton and surrounding locations and residents nearby in Stokesville would smell smoke. Smoke would likely settle in lower elevations and valleys during the night and early mornings. An appropriate number of trained fire management specialists, as specified in the burn plan, would perform all burning operations.

An adaptive management strategy would be used to ensure that the desired future condition of this unit can be achieved in a timely and efficient manner. Pre-burn vegetative monitoring would be completed and could be used to assess the current condition and to develop specific

objectives. Post-burn monitoring would be used to evaluate the condition of the unit and adjust future objectives.

**Public Involvement**

Supporting documentation is available at:
www.fs.usda.gov/projects/gwj/landmanagement/projects or at the North River Ranger District, 401 Oakwood Drive, Harrisonburg, VA. 22801. For additional information regarding this project please contact: Tom Ledbetter, North Zone Fire Management Officer, 540-432-0187, or tjledbetter@fs.fed.us.

We are currently preparing a categorical exclusion (CE), in accordance with regulations 36 CFR 220.6(e) (6), subject to public involvement and the determination that no extraordinary circumstances exist. Effective March 15, 2014, categorically excluded projects are no longer required to offer notice and comment and appeal opportunities, pursuant to 36 CFR 218.23(a) [Federal Register Vol. 79, No. 147]. However, we will continue to offer opportunities for your comments and involvement with this decision as provided in the scoping procedures under NEPA. Although we will consider your input at any time before the decision is made, it would be most helpful to hear your issues/concerns specific to this project within 30 days from the date of this letter. When a decision is made, we will promptly mail the appropriate decision and analysis documentation to those who participated in the process or who specifically request the information.

Written comments must be submitted to:
Elwood Burge
District Ranger
North River Ranger District
401 Oakwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22801
Office: 540-432-0187

The office hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx) to *comments-southern-georgewashington-jefferson-northriver@fs.fed.us*. Please state "North New Road Run Prescribed Burn" in the subject line when providing electronic comments, or on the envelope when replying by mail.

Elwood Burge
District Ranger

Date 7/9/2015