



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

George Washington and Jefferson
National Forests

Lee Ranger District
95 Railroad Avenue
Edinburg, VA 22824

File Code: 1950

Date: April 22, 2024

Dear Friends of the North River and Lee Ranger Districts,

The USDA Forest Service, is seeking comments regarding the North Zone Prescribed Fire and Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Project. The project proposal includes prescribed fire on 4,500 acres and mechanical vegetation treatments on 85 acres within 7 individual locations across the North River and Lee Ranger Districts on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forest.

We are interested in your insight and feedback on the project proposal. Your comments will help us in bringing forward the best possible approach for continued management of Forest Service lands.

Proposed Action

The North River and Lee Ranger Districts are proposing the following:

North River Gorge Area - prescribed fire on 1817 acres in MA 4FA (Shenandoah Mountain Recommended National Scenic Area)

Sugar Tree Area – prescribed fire on 995 acres in MA 13 (Mosaics of Habitat) and MA 7G (Pastoral Landscapes)

Reddish Knob Area – prescribed fire on 24 acres in MA 8E7 (Shenandoah Mountain Crest) and 4FA (Shenandoah Mountain Recommended National Scenic Area)

Cub Run 2 Area – prescribed fire on 401 acres in MA 13 (Mosaics of Habitat)

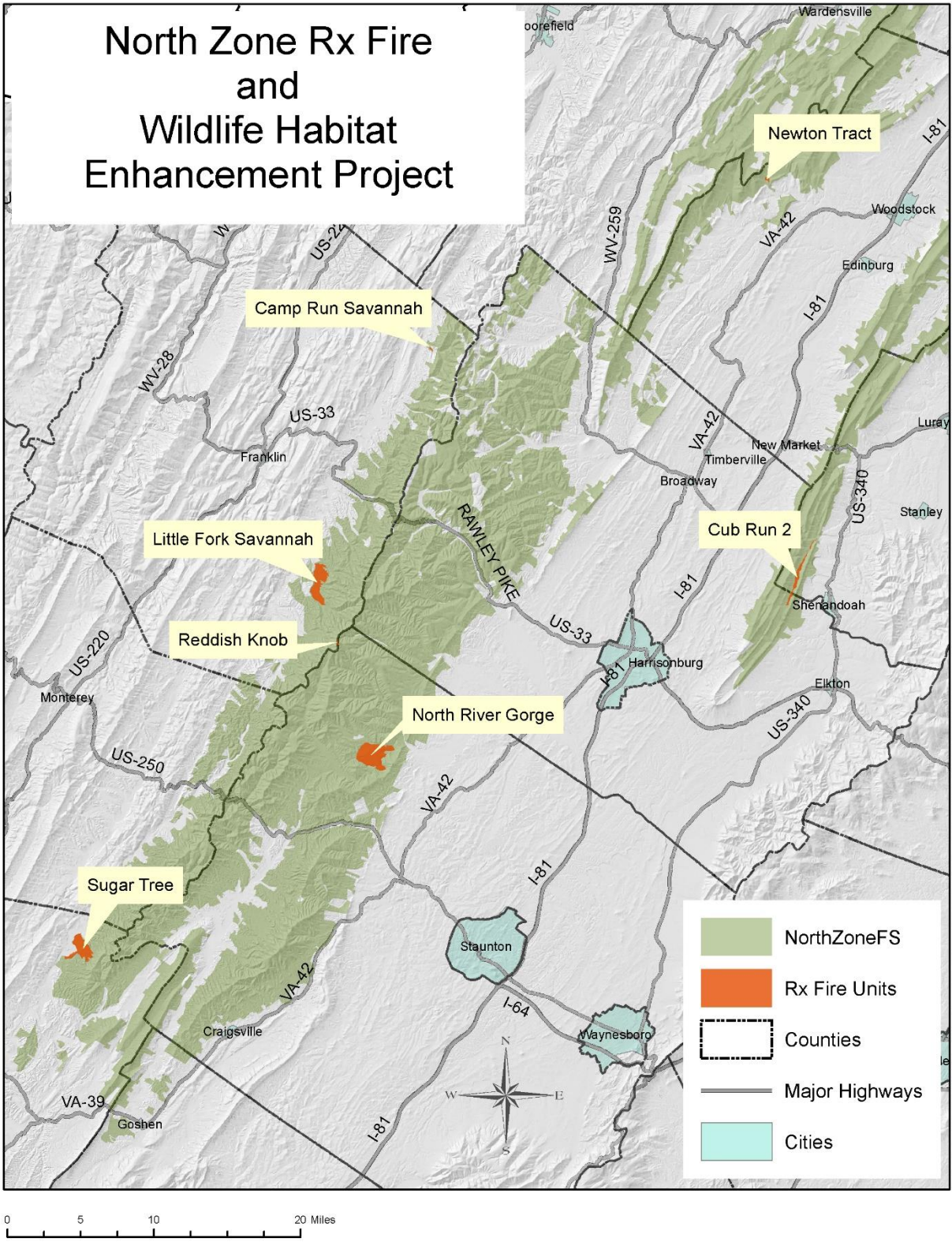
Little Fork Savannah Area – prescribed fire on 1201 acres in MA 13 (Mosaics of Habitat) and 4D (Special Biological Area), 85 acres of mechanical vegetation treatments and about 0.5 mile of dozer line in MA 13

Vegetation management opportunities include these mechanical treatments:

- Clearing expansion/creation and stump removal: 40 acres (these are areas already cut to 15-40 BA)
- Pine Removal: 30 acres (these are to remove non-native Scotch and red pine trees completely)
- White pine thinning: 15 acres (thinning of white pine stands adjacent to savannahs)

Camp Run Savannah Area – prescribed fire on 19 acres and about 0.5 mile of dozer line in MA 13 (Mosaics of Habitat)

Newton Tract Area – prescribed fire on 35 acres and about 0.7 mile of dozer line in MA 13 (Mosaics of Habitat)



Purpose and Need for the Project

The 2014 George Washington National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (herein referred to as the Forest Plan) calls for the creation of more “open canopy” conditions. This can be done by using: a) prescribed fire, b) mechanical operations, or c) mechanical and fire together. The desired range of stocking (post treatment) is approximately 30 to 60 ft² or 35 to 75 trees per acre. Numerous studies indicate that a considerable portion of the GWNF was more “open” prior to the late 19th century. Open conditions promoted grasses, forbs, and shrubs in the understory. Frequent ground fires are thought to have maintained these open conditions.

The proposed prescribed burns are designed to bring these units closer to the desired conditions listed in this EA. The purpose and need for the proposed treatments include mimicking natural fire behavior to benefit fire-adapted species and improve wildlife habitat for a wide range of species that depend on both mature overstory and a well-developed grassy/shrubby/herbaceous understory. Proposed burns would: benefit fire-adapted species, reduce fuel accumulation in order to better protect National Forest System land and adjacent ownerships from wildfire, reduce undesirable shade-tolerant species (such as red maple, tulip poplar, and eastern white pine) and allow for regeneration of desirable species.

There is a need to enhance habitat for wildlife, including mast (soft and hard) and cover. Prescribed burning rejuvenates and stimulates hard/soft mast species so that they produce mast. It stimulates huckleberry, low bush blueberry, and increases herbaceous vegetation and browse. Central Appalachian Shale Barren occur in habitats that experience regular fire interval and are enhanced through prescribed burning. A Special Biological Area containing this resource has been designated in the Little Fork Savannah Area and will benefit from prescribed fire. Prescribed fire and the combination of vegetation management within other areas of the Little Fork Savannah Area will further promote the growth and spread of native grasses, promote an open woodland condition dominated by herbaceous plants as a ground cover and diversify wildlife habitat.

Decision to be Made

We anticipate this proposal to be categorically excluded from documentation in an Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) under 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6):

220.6(e)(6) Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities that do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than 1 mile of low standard road construction.

This decision will be documented in an official Decision Memo after received comments have been considered and the analysis has been completed.

Public Involvement

As a result of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (Public Law No. 113-76) and the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Farm Bill, Public Law No. 102-381), the Forest Service will no longer offer appeal opportunities for categorically excluded projects. However, we will continue to offer public involvement opportunities for these projects and will take public comments into consideration before final decisions are made. Therefore, we welcome your involvement and encourage your comments on this proposal. Comments received, including names and contact information of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be

accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Written comments concerning this proposal will be accepted until May 24, 2024. Comments may be submitted through the Project website via the web form:

<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?Project=64669>

This web form can also be accessed from the project website:

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=64669>

On the right side, you can select "Comment/Object on Project." Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx).

Written comments can also be submitted hardcopy to:

USDA Forest Service
ATTN: Mary Yonce
401 Oakwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22801

Please share any specific concerns that you feel need to be considered within the context of this proposed action. Make your comments as concise as you can and address the proposed action specifically. State "North Zone Prescribed Fire and Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Project" in the subject line when providing electronic comments, or on the envelope when replying by mail.

If you have questions about this proposal please contact Jay Martin at jay.martin2@usda.gov. Thank you for your interest in the management of your National Forests.

Sincerely,

District Ranger