



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Mark Twain National Forest
Poplar Bluff
Ranger District

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File Code: 1950/1920-1-5

Date: February 19, 2010

Dear Planning Participant:

I am writing to inform you of a proposed restoration project here on the Poplar Bluff Ranger District, Mark Twain National Forest (MTNF). We would like to have your comments on a proposal that would improve habitat for plants and animals that use riparian habitats composed of ephemeral wetlands and bottomland hardwood forest. Today, wetland habitats are considered one of the most endangered habitats in Missouri and throughout the United States, and few remain intact. Many were altered or destroyed so that the land could be converted to cropland or pasture. As a result of these alterations, many of the bottomland hardwood forest, ephemeral wetlands, and meandering streams that once covered areas along the Black River are now gone.

THE PROPOSAL

The Poplar Bluff Ranger District is proposing to restore two wetland riparian areas along the Black River. Both areas are located along or in close proximity to the Black River, and are approximately eight air miles apart. Please refer to the enclosed vicinity and site-specific maps for general and specific locations.

The primary purpose of the proposed project, named the Black River Riparian Restoration Project, is to restore components of healthy wetland riparian corridors in these two areas. They include: 1) approximately 10-15 acres along the Black in an area historically known as the "Adam's Tract"; and 2) approximately 10-15 acres along a tributary of the Black River in the Hockinberry Hollow area.

We are asking for site-specific comments that would be useful in helping us analyze this proposed project, and that will assist us in identifying potential issues, alternatives, and mitigation measures for the project.

LOCATION

The Black River Riparian Restoration Project is located in two separate areas on the Poplar Bluff Ranger District. The first, Adam's Tract, is located in Wayne County, and is approximately 16 air miles northwest of Poplar Bluff, Missouri between the communities of Williamsville and Mill Spring. The legal description is: Township 27 North, Range 4 East, Section 10. The project borders private property to the west, north, and east. Hockinberry Hollow is located in Butler County, approximately seven miles north/northwest of Poplar Bluff and north of the Hendrickson community. The legal description for this area is Township 26 North, Range 6 East, Section 18.



BACKGROUND

The Black River Riparian Restoration Project represents two of many areas along the Black River that were altered historically for farming, a practice that still remains widespread today on private land along the river corridor. Grazing was permitted on the Adam's Tract allotment for nearly 25 years, where as many as 38 cattle occupied the area at any one time. The Forest Service ended grazing use on this area in 2005.

Currently, vegetation within the open areas at the two sites consists primarily of non-native invasive species such as fescue, sericea lespedeza, and Japanese honeysuckle. A review of historic aerial photos of the site also shows evidence of wetland drainage and movement of the stream corridor adjacent to the Adam's Tract.

A portion of the Adam's Tract area was in cultivation or grazing as early as 1932, based on these photographs. These photos show meandering stream courses surrounded by bottomland forests. Trees such as American elm, American sycamore, eastern cottonwood, sugar maple, green ash, sweetgum, and various oaks, among others, once dominated this bottomland. Relicts of these trees can still be found scattered in the small parcels of riparian forest that remain within the Adam's Tract today.

Surrounding hydric soil types indicate that the land within the Adam's Tract area was interspersed with several wetlands, which would have provided habitat for numerous plants and animals. A field examination of the site by U.S. Forest Service Wildlife Biologist Tom Biebighauser on October 31, 2008 determined that the site had its hydrology altered in order to reduce the soil moisture and eliminate any wetland characteristics that may have been historically present on the site.

A similar situation exists in the Hockinberry Hollow area, although on a much smaller scale. Aerial photos from 1951 of this area show remnant stream courses surrounded by areas of cultivation. The area along the unnamed stream that flows through the site has been in an open condition since at least 1935. Again, based on the clay soils prevalent across the area, it is likely wetland habitats once occurred in pockets in the Hockinberry Hollow area prior to the area being drained for cultivation.

PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is to restore some of the hydrological features and forest composition that were part of the Black River floodplain prior to European settlement. To move toward this desired condition, two activities would occur as a result of the project.

First, ephemeral wetlands would be restored in the bottomland to replace those that were drained. This would be accomplished by using heavy equipment (e.g. dozers, graders, backhoes, excavators, et al) to create shallow depressions – also called ephemeral ponds or pools - in pockets of silt-clay-loam soils within the project area. These pools may or may not hold water year-round. Following completion of ground disturbance activities, exposed soils would be immediately re-seeded with a desirable native seed mix and covered with weed-free straw mulch to mitigate erosion concerns. As part of the wetland re-establishment process, any ditches or drains that show evidence of having been created or altered for historical draining of the land would be modified to restore the natural hydrology of the area. Any underground drainage tiles or structures inadvertently discovered at the site would be removed.

Next, a variety of native aquatic plants would be planted within and/or on the edges of the ephemeral ponds. A mix of hardwood trees native to riparian areas of the Missouri Ozarks may also be planted. Examples of species to be planted include but are not limited to American sycamore, Eastern cottonwood, sweetgum, green ash, burr oak, pin oak, swamp white oak, shellbark hickory, and northern red oak.

FOREST PLAN DIRECTION

The 2005 Mark Twain National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) provides general guidance and direction for the Proposed Action. The Forest Plan supports wetland and bottomland hardwood preservation and restoration (Forest Plan, Goal 1.3, page 1-3) and activities that distribute natural communities similar to historic patterns.

The Black River Riparian Restoration project area is located within Forest Plan Management Prescription (MP) 2.1. The direction for MP 2.1 is to “manage terrestrial and aquatic natural communities to enhance and retain their characteristic ecological elements” (Forest Plan, pages 3-11 through 3-12).

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of this project is to restore some of the hydrological features and forest composition in the project areas that were part of the Black River floodplain prior to European settlement.

DECISION TO BE MADE

Generally, the Proposed Action falls in a category of decisions established by the Chief of the Forest Service as routine actions that do not normally, in and of themselves, individually or cumulatively, have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment and, therefore, may be excluded from documentation in an environmental assessment. However, it does fall within a sub-category of actions that requires scoping, a project or case file, and any decision to proceed must be documented in a decision memo. The sub-category is found in the Forest Service Handbook 1909.15; specifically Category 31.2 {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."*

As the District Ranger of the Poplar Bluff Ranger District I am the responsible official for deciding whether or not to proceed with the proposed action for the Black River Riparian Restoration Project. I may decide to select:

1. the Proposed Action;
2. modify the Proposed Action; or
3. defer making a decision at this time.

My decision may include mitigation measures in addition to the Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines considered for this project. Documentation and rationale of included modifications and additional measures would be made in the decision document. Any decision would be implemented in compliance with all federal, state and local laws, regulations or requirements and the standards of the Forest Plan. If approved, implementation may begin as early as spring 2010.

HOW TO COMMENT

To comment or obtain additional site specific information on this project, you can do so in a number of ways. You can use the attached “Public Comment Form” if you wish, but it is not required. Methods for you to comment include:

- In writing: Contact, Poplar Bluff Ranger District, P.O. Box 988, Poplar Bluff, MO, 63902. Attention: Megan York-Harris.
- Telephone: Contact, Megan York-Harris, Wildlife Biologist, at the Poplar Bluff Ranger District Office during business hours (8:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. CST) at 573-785-1475, or in person at 1420 Maud Street, Poplar Bluff, MO 63901.
- Fax: Address to: Megan York-Harris, Wildlife Biologist at 573-785-0267.
- E-mail: myorkharris@fs.fed.us Acceptable formats for electronic comments are: text or HTML e-mail, Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF), or formats printable in Microsoft Office applications.

Please Specify **Black River Riparian Restoration Project** on your subject line.

Please provide your comments on this proposal by March 24, 2010. Comments received in response to this proposal, including names and addresses of those who comment, will become part of the public record and will be available for public review and inspection.

Thank you for your interest in the management of the Mark Twain National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ Douglas F. Oliver
DOUGLAS F. OLIVER
District Ranger

Enclosures

1. Vicinity Map
2. Adams Tract Map
3. Hockinberry Hollow Map
4. Public Comment Form