



File Code: 1920/2600

Date: December 15, 2005

Dear Forest User:

The Toccoa Ranger District is seeking public comments on a proposed project to enhance habitat conditions for the golden-winged warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) on the south slope of Brawley Mountain in Fannin, County, Georgia. The golden-winged warbler is a migratory songbird whose populations have severely declined over much of its range in recent decades. It breeds in southern Canada, the Northeast and North Central United States, and Appalachian Mountains south to northern Georgia. It is listed as a Locally Rare species on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. Based on extensive surveys, this portion of Brawley Mountain retains the only significant population of golden-winged warblers in Georgia. This project is a cooperative effort between the U.S. Forest Service and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program.

Previous storm damage by Hurricane Opal in 1995 and subsequent salvage logging on Brawley Mountain created some of the only suitable habitat at an appropriate high elevation for golden-winged warblers in the region. Habitat is limited to approximately 20 acres at two sites along the top of the mountain, and a population of 4-12 individuals has been present since at least 2001. Lack of additional suitable habitat at appropriate elevation, isolation from other populations, and small size makes this population highly susceptible to local extirpation.

The purpose of the project is to create and maintain suitable golden-winged warbler habitat by moving the area toward the desired conditions in the Forest Plan through the restoration of open woodland conditions (Forest Plan Objective 3.4). Open oak woodlands are a natural habitat type that once was common in the region but now is virtually absent due to decades of fire suppression. Woodlands are characterized by open, but highly variable tree canopy conditions, limited shrub cover, and a groundcover of herbaceous species, especially grasses. The Brawley Mountain area was identified for woodland restoration because of the opportunity provided to enhance habitat conditions for the existing golden-winged warbler population. Currently, there is a mixture of native warm season grasses, composites, and some fire hardy trees in portions of the project area which indicate historic presence of oak woodland. The proposed activities also will improve habitat conditions for a variety of other wildlife species by increasing herbaceous and shrubby cover that is used by golden-winged warblers and other species such as indigo buntings, chestnut-sided warblers, yellow breasted chats, prairie warblers, chipping sparrows, mourning dove, field sparrows, and ruffed grouse. This project also will address a number of Forest Plan Goals and Objectives including contributing to the viability of native wildlife species and conservation of rare species (Goals 1 and 19), providing for a diversity of wildlife habitats (Goals 2 and 3), and the restoration of natural communities (Goal 4).

The Brawley Mountain area is located within Management Prescription 7.E.1 Dispersed Recreation Areas. These areas receive moderate to high recreation use and are managed to provide a variety of recreational opportunities in a setting that provides quality scenery, numerous trails, and limited facilities. The management emphasis is to improve the setting for non-formal outdoor recreation in a manner that protects and restores the health, diversity, and



productivity of watersheds. The desired condition for this area is to provide a landscape that is naturally appearing with variations in native tree sizes and ages. The Benton MacKaye trail is located along the northern border of the project area. The proposed activities will result in the restoration of the area to an historic, natural woodland condition.

Restoration would be conducted primarily on south and west facing slopes and ridgelines where woodland habitat would have naturally occurred. A combination of selective tree canopy reduction and moderate intensity prescribed fire will be used to safely mimic the effects of the catastrophic fires which historically established this habitat. Tree species associated with this habitat type, such as blackjack oak, southern red oak, yellow pines and others will be left, while less fire tolerant species will be selectively removed by a combination of commercial timber harvest and cutting and leaving the trees on site. The tree canopy opening treatment would be highly variable depending on aspect, slope position, and landform (see attached map). The most significant tree canopy reduction (>80%) would occur on the upper slopes and associated ridge tops with south or west aspects (approximately 200 acres). Moderate levels of tree canopy reduction (40-70%), would occur on the mid slope position (approximately 400 acres) and limited tree canopy reduction (<30%), would occur in the lower slopes, coves and riparian areas (approximately 125 acres). The existing overstory tree canopy would be maintained along the Benton MacKaye trail.

A regular regime of moderate intensity prescribed fire will be used to maintain this habitat over coming decades. Burning would take place approximately once every 4-5 years during the dormant and growing seasons. Burning intensity would be greatest on the ridge tops, moderate on the mid-slope positions and low in the coves and riparian areas. To assist in the development of a ground cover of native grasses on the ridge top sites, a selective herbicide application will be used to prevent stump sprouting of some of the shade intolerant but fire intolerant hardwood species. Presently there is a rather dense understory of hardwood stems that will sprout prolifically when top-killed by fire. Their density puts at risk the ability to establish and maintain native warm season grasses. As needed, these ridge top sites also will be supplementally seeded with native grass species.

Initial monitoring of golden-winged warblers and other songbird species on Brawley Mountain has been conducted by Georgia Department of Natural Resources personnel. Songbird populations will be monitored following treatment to measure the response of these species to the woodland restoration activities. A more widespread distribution of golden-winged warblers and associated species or increased populations will be the measures of success for this project.

The proposed project was developed by a Forest Service and Georgia Department of Natural Resources Interdisciplinary Team. Field reviews of the project also have been conducted with representatives of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, Atlanta Audubon, and Georgia Forest Watch.

The restoration of the woodland community would take place over a 5-10 year period. The environmental analysis will be conducted in 2006 with a final decision on the project anticipated for late 2006. The treatments to reduce the tree canopy through timber sales and felling contracts would occur over a 2-3 year period (2007-2009). The initial prescribed burn would occur approximately 2 years after the completion of the canopy treatments (2010-2011).

We are currently in the process of determining the significant environmental issues and public concerns. You can help us in completing our analysis by providing comments on this proposal as we have described it. Your comments should be as specific as possible and contain the following information: your name and address, the project name (Brawley Mountain Woodland Project), and specific facts or comments along with the supporting reasons you believe your comments should be considered by the Deciding Official in reaching a decision. You may respond to the Brasstown Ranger District office at the address below:

U.S. Forest Service
P.O. Box 9
Blairsville, GA 30514

You may also provide your comments by fax at (706) 745-7494 (Brasstown R.D.), or e-mail your comments to jwentworth@fs.fed.us. If you have any questions about this project please direct them to Jim Wentworth on the Brasstown District. To have your comments considered in our planning process we need to receive your reply by January 15, 2006.

Thank you for your time and interest in the management activities on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

Sincerely,

/s/ Alan Polk
ALAN POLK
DISTRICT RANGER

Attachments: Location Map
Project Area Map