

Nantahala and Pisgah Forest Plan Revision
Proposed Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement
Forest Service Deep Dive #1 – Fire
February 11, 2020
Question and Answer

Q: How long does a patch of early successional habitat/young forest take to recover after being burned?

A: This depends on the site and the severity of the burn. Forest Service fire specialists have seen wildlife returning shortly after burns in some cases. Fire can also be used to maintain early successional habitat and keep a site from moving towards mature forest.

Q: How long does it take for a fire-adapted forest type (such as oaks or yellow pines in dry areas) to move from early successional habitat/young forest to mature forest?

A: Fire-adapted forest types are often in drier, less productive sites and will remain in the early successional habitat/young forest phase for longer. For example, fire-adapted sites may be considered early successional habitat for 20 years of regrowth, compared to just 10 years for wetter, more productive areas where trees mature more quickly.

Q: How can fire add to the amount of early successional habitat/young forest?

A: Fire can be used to both maintain a site as early successional habitat or, if a burn is severe enough, can be used to create new early successional habitat in sites with mature forest.

Q: How will acres of habitat created by fire be tracked (such as woodlands and early successional habitat/young forest)? This will be important to track progress towards plan goals.

A: The Forest Service is still working on the monitoring pieces of the plan and will build on input from the Forest Service Southern Research Station, partners, and the public. The FS intends to track prescribed fire actions and effectiveness, especially in regards to objectives with fire-adapted ecozones. The system design for tracking is under discussion.

Q: How are you balancing management area priorities with fire-adapted species needs? For example, how are you balancing fire-adapted threatened and endangered species in the Linville Gorge?

A: Threatened and endangered species are factored into the analysis prioritizing areas for the prescribed fire program, though prescribed fire will also be influenced by final management area allocations. Some threatened species, such as mountain golden heather found in the Linville Gorge, will have their own objectives for management. Introducing fire to help such species will need to be balanced with management area constraints, requiring additional approvals in designated wilderness, and the potential for fire management to aggravate issues with some non-native invasive species.

Q: Are the prescribed burn objectives and the woodlands objectives additive, or can burned acres be “double counted” and considered to meet both objectives?

A: In the draft plan, if the Forest Service burned an area and created woodland conditions, this would count towards both prescribed fire objectives and woodland objectives.

Q: How do the plan alternatives influence overall prescribed burn opportunities on the Forest?

A: Prescribed burn opportunities are influenced by many factors – need, management area objectives, and features to control burns, such as roads and drainages. Smaller burns may be more frequent in

Matrix, where there is the greatest amount of roaded access, and the most flexibility for creating firelines, and the greatest opportunity to conduct mechanical fuel treatments as well. To reach Tier 2 goals, larger prescribed burns may be used in more larger landscape scale burns Backcountry. Relative proportions of these management areas could influence types of opportunities for prescribed fire.

Q: What is the rationale for the categories of management areas in terms of ease for prescribed burns? For example, Matrix is rated easier for burning (category 1 out of 4) and Backcountry is rated more difficult (category 3 out of 4). However, Backcountry areas would provide larger burn blocks away from communities (also known as the “wildland-urban interface”), which could make burning more acres easier.

A: All prescribed fires come with risks and are complex. The greatest amount of fire management is expected in the Matrix, where the most acres would be managed annually. Here there is the greatest amount of roaded access and the most flexibility for creating firelines and mechanical fuel treatments. Depending on the context, Backcountry areas may allow relative ease, however generally this management area is less accessible, with fewer roads. Prescribed burns in backcountry would tend to be larger, generally more than 500 acres, and extending to existing natural and human fire breaks due to limitations on new mechanical firelines. Large burns require more planning and mitigation and hence may not be as feasible. Additionally, mechanical fuel treatments would be limited. The desired conditions for Backcountry emphasize remoteness and lean toward natural disturbance regimes. So, it is important to take care of where and how access is provided to prescribe burn in Backcountry to meet those desired conditions.

Q: Are there parameters for the classification of trails that will serve as fire barriers?

A: There are no trails designated to act as fire barriers in the draft plan. When prescribed fires are planned for an area, trails may be used to contain fires and may need to be managed to remove understory brush to be effective.

Q: Is national level guidance on wildland fire management (both prescribed fire and wildfire) incorporated into the draft? Specifically, is guidance from *Integrating Wildland Fire Management into Land Management Planning* in the draft plan?

A: The Integrating Wildland Fire Management into Land Management Planning guide has been used since it was developed, which was concurrently with the Forest Plan Revision process. It clarifies direction for both prescribed fire and wildfire planning. The guide cites overarching Federal Wildland Fire Management policy and provides clarity on direction on prescribed fire planning, and various procedures, such as Forest Service is to use the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) for suppression planning-

Q: What is required to conduct a prescribed burn in a Wilderness area?

A: There are national forests in the southeast that have had Wilderness areas approved for prescribe burns for ecological priorities and to reduce the impacts of wildfires. This has not yet occurred in the Nantahala & Pisgah, except for some experimental burning in the early 1990's for *Hudsonia montana* research. In order to burn in the wilderness for ecological restoration, the Chief would need to approve or delegate authority. In addition, a minimum requirements decision guide (MRDG) would need to be completed and approved by the regional forester.

Q: Is there a Tier 1 goal for early successional habitat/young forest created by fire?

A: Tier 1 objectives for early successional habitat/young forest are more likely to be achieved through other means, but fire could be part of the picture. Fire is likely to play a larger role in achieving Tier 2 early successional habitat/young forest objectives that might occur in bigger burns conducted in Backcountry areas.

Q: Will the Tier 1 and Tier 2 prescribed fire objective numbers move the needle towards meeting the terrestrial ecozone desired conditions?

A: There is a long history of fire suppression and other activities that have changed these forests. Restoring towards desired conditions will take many planning cycles. Current objectives will move the needle upward, but will not solve these problems in the life of the plan.

Q: In Plan Appendix B, are the numbers in Tier 2 of tables 5 through 7 additive to Tier 1, or cumulative?

A: For each alternative and for each tier a separate SPECTRUM model was built and run. The estimates for Tier 1 and Tier 2 are not additive as the analyses were conducted independently for each Tier. The outputs that are presented in the tables are the model outputs based on the objectives and management area allocations for that alternative and tier. If an Alternative and Tier was selected then we would work towards those objectives (Tier) and the numbers presented for that tier are estimates of what the outputs would be (i.e. you would not add tier 1 to tier 2 for a given alternative). Note that these are approximations and should not be related directly to future forest treatment levels.