



Hazardous Fuel Reduction and Longleaf Pine Restoration – Big Sandy Creek Unit, Polk County, Texas

Project Scoping for an Environmental Assessment

March 23, 2009

Dear Friend of Big Thicket National Preserve:

The National Park Service (NPS) is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) to address hazardous fuel reduction and longleaf pine restoration in the Big Sandy Creek Unit of Big Thicket National Preserve (Preserve) resulting from increased downed trees and woody debris following Hurricanes Rita and Ike.

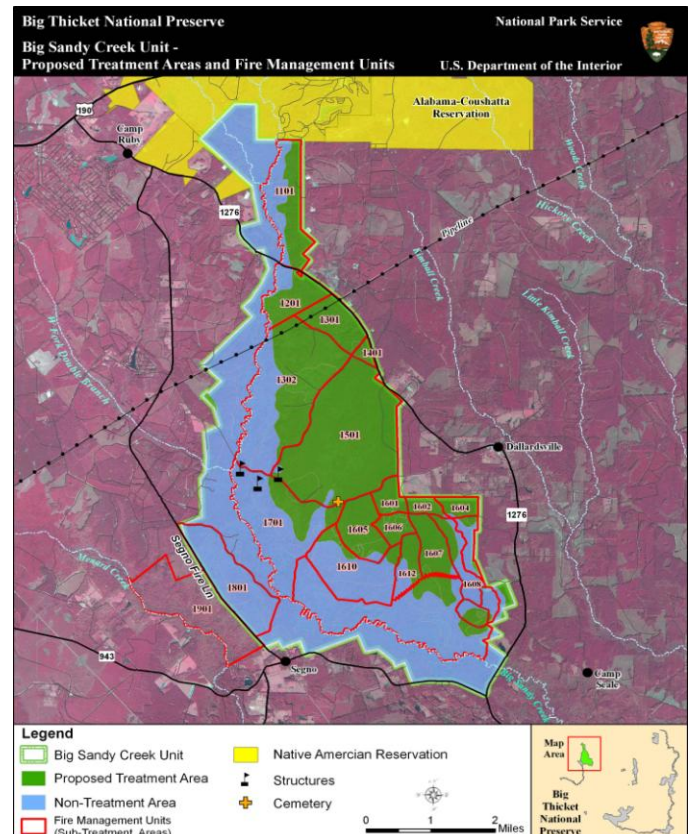
In 2005 and 2008, wind from hurricanes caused a significant increase in downed woody debris which has created the potential for higher intensity wildfires during drought conditions. In addition to hurricane wind damage, Southern Pine Beetle infestations in the 1980s contributed to overstory tree canopy loss and downed trees in some areas. Also in the 1980s, the Preserve's fire management program started conducting prescribed burns in efforts to restore and maintain fire dependent ecosystems.

Consistent with NPS management policies, laws, and regulations, the objectives for this project are to 1) Reduce hazardous fuel accumulations to protect both human life and property and the Preserve's natural and cultural resources, 2) Decrease fuels and midstory brush in order to restore longleaf pine habitat, and 3) Prevent impairment of Preserve resources and limit impacts on Preserve operations and management.

The NPS is preparing an EA in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to provide the decision-making framework that 1) explores a reasonable range of alternatives to meet project objectives, 2) evaluates potential impacts to park resources and values, and 3) identifies mitigation measures to minimize the degree of these impacts.

The NPS encourages public participation throughout the NEPA process during which the public has two opportunities to comment on this project; once during initial project scoping and again following release of the EA. We are currently in the scoping phase of this project, and I invite you to voice your ideas, comments, or concerns about this effort. These comments will be considered during preparation of the EA.

*Sincerely,
Todd W. Brindle
Superintendent*



Alternatives

Following is the preliminary range of alternatives to be evaluated in the EA:

Alternative 1 – No Action The NPS would continue current management of the Big Sandy Creek Unit utilizing prescribed fire and mechanical treatments to reduce downed woody fuels and restore fire dependent ecosystems.

Alternative 2 – Herbicide Use as an Additional Management Tool In conjunction with the current prescribed burn and mechanical fuel reduction treatments, the NPS would conduct targeted herbicide applications to understory brush to decrease resprouts and midstory fuels. These treatments would only occur in upland and midslope pine forests in efforts to decrease hardwood competition, and foster germination of herbaceous vegetation along with regeneration of longleaf pine.

Overview of the Process

The basic steps of the NEPA process for this project include (“*” indicated opportunities for public comment):

- **Public scoping (closes April 30, 2009)***
- Preparation of the EA
- Public review of the EA*
- Analysis of public comment
- Preparation of decision document
- Announcement of decision
- Implementation

Resources and Concerns

The Environmental Assessment will analyze potential impacts to a number of resources including:

Soils, Water Resources (including Floodplains and Wetlands), Air Quality, Vegetation, Wildlife, Species of Special Concern, Soundscapes, Socioeconomics, Public Health and Safety, Preserve Operations, and Visitor Use and Experience.

Ideas to Consider

Following are a few ideas to keep in mind as you develop your comments on this proposal:

1. Are there any outstanding issues or concerns that should be addressed in the EA?
2. Are there any other alternatives that you think should be considered?
3. Do you have other comments and suggestions for us to consider in the EA?

How Do I Comment on This Project?

Please submit your comments online at the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment website:

<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/bith/>

If you are unable to submit comments electronically through this website, then you may also submit written comments to the address on the postmark, Attention: Chris Peapenburg.

You may also hand-deliver written comments to the visitor center at Big Thicket National Preserve.

**Please provide all comments by
April 30, 2009.**

If you wish to be added to or removed from the Preserve’s mailing list for future correspondence, please indicate that in your response.