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This section of the FEDERAL REGISTER contains documents other than rules or proposed rules that are applicable to the public. Notices of hearings and investigations, committee meetings, agency decisions and rulings, delegations of authority, filing of petitions and applications and agency statements of organization and functions are examples of documents appearing in this section.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

[Docket No. APHIS–2015–0042]

Notice of a Determination Regarding the Fever Tick Status of the State of Chihuahua, Excluding the Municipalities of Guadalupe y Calvo and Morelos

AGENCY: Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: We are advising the public that we have determined that the State of Chihuahua, excluding the municipalities of Guadalupe y Calvo and Morelos, is free from fever ticks. Based on an evaluation of the fever tick status of this region, which we made available to the public for review and comment through a previous notice, the Administrator has determined that this region is free from fever ticks and that ruminants imported from the region present a low risk of exposing ruminants in the United States to fever ticks.

DATES: This change in fever tick status will be recognized on April 27, 2018.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Dr. Betzaida Lopez, Senior Staff Veterinarian, National Import Export Services, VS, APHIS, 4700 River Road Unit 39, Riverdale, MD 20737; (301) 851–3300.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The regulations in 9 CFR part 93 prohibit or restrict the importation of certain animals, birds, and poultry into the United States to prevent the introduction of communicable diseases of livestock and poultry. Subpart D of part 93 (§§ 93.400 through 93.436, referred to below as the regulations) governs the importation of ruminants; within the regulations, §§ 93.424 through 93.429 specifically address the

importation of ruminants from Mexico into the United States.

The regulations in paragraph (b)(1) of § 93.427 contain conditions for the importation of ruminants from regions of Mexico that we consider free from the *Rhipicephalus* (formerly *Boophilus*) *annulatus* ticks and *Rhipicephalus microplus* ticks, known as cattle fever ticks. Fever ticks are the North American vectors for bovine babesiosis, or cattle fever. Regions of Mexico that we consider free from fever ticks are listed at https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/animal-and-animal-product-import-information/ct_animal_disease_status. Currently, the State of Sonora is the only region on this list.

The regulations in 9 CFR 92.2 contain requirements for requesting the recognition of the animal health status of a region or for the approval of the export of a particular type of animal or animal product to the United States from a foreign region. If, after review and evaluation of the information submitted in support of the request, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) believes the request can be safely granted, APHIS will make its evaluation available for public comment through a notice published in the **Federal Register**. Following the close of the comment period, APHIS will review all comments received and will make a final determination regarding the request that will be detailed in another notice published in the **Federal Register**.

In accordance with that process, Mexico asked APHIS to recognize the State of Chihuahua, except the municipalities of Guadalupe y Calvo and Morelos, as a region free from fever ticks. In response to this request, we prepared an evaluation of the fever tick status of this region. The evaluation concluded that the State of Chihuahua, excluding the municipalities of Guadalupe y Calvo and Morelos, is free from fever ticks, and that ruminants imported from the region pose a low risk of exposing ruminants within the United States to fever ticks.

On May 12, 2016, we published in the **Federal Register** (81 FR 29524–29525, Docket No. APHIS–2015–0042) a notice¹ in which we announced the

¹To view the notice and the evaluation, go to <http://www.regulations.gov/#!docketDetail;D=APHIS-2015-0042>.

availability for review and comment of our evaluation of the fever tick status of the State of Chihuahua, except the municipalities of Guadalupe y Calvo and Morelos. We solicited comments on the notice for 60 days ending on July 11, 2016. We received no comments on our evaluation.

Therefore, based on the findings of our evaluation and the absence of comments that would lead us to reconsider those findings, we are announcing our determination to add the State of Chihuahua, excluding the municipalities of Guadalupe y Calvo and Morelos, to the list of regions of Mexico declared free from fever ticks. This list is available on the APHIS website at https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/animal-and-animal-product-import-information/ct_animal_disease_status.

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 1622 and 8301–8317; 21 U.S.C. 136 and 136a; 31 U.S.C. 9701; 7 CFR 2.22, 2.80, and 371.4.

Done in Washington, DC, this 22nd day of March 2018.

Kevin Shea,

Administrator, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

[FR Doc. 2018–06131 Filed 3–27–18; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–34–P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Andrew Pickens Ranger District, Sumter National Forest, South Carolina; Supplement to the 2013 AP Loblolly Pine Removal and Restoration Project

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for the AP Loblolly Pine Removal and Restoration Project.

SUMMARY: The USDA Forest Service is preparing a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for the AP Loblolly Pine Removal and Restoration Project. The purpose of this project is to restore native vegetation typical of the Southern Appalachian Mountains in areas that were planted to non-native loblolly pine plantations in the 1970s. A number of vegetative treatments have been implemented since the Final Environmental Impact Statement was completed and the

Record of Decision was signed in 2013. Implementation monitoring and field reviews indicate that some changes are needed to the original decision.

DATES: Scoping comments for this supplement must be received by April 27, 2018. The Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (DSEIS) is expected in June 2018, and the Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (FSEIS) is expected in October 2018.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to USDA Forest Service, 112 Andrew Pickens Circle, Mountain Rest, South Carolina 29664. Comments may also be sent via email to comments-southern-francismarion-sumter-andrewpickens@fs.fed.us, or via facsimile to 864-638-2659.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Robbie Sitzlar (rsitzlar@fs.fed.us) and/or Victor Wyant (vwyant@fs.fed.us), 864-638-9568.

Individuals who use telecommunication devices for the deaf (TDD) may call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 1-800-877-8339 between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., Eastern Time, Monday through Friday.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: In May 2013, the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the AP Loblolly Pine Removal and Restoration Project (2013 FEIS) was completed and a Record of Decision (2013 ROD) was signed by the Andrew Pickens District Ranger on May 22, 2013. The 2013 FEIS and 2013 ROD along with other supporting documents are available at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=28634>. These documents include descriptions of the purpose and need for the project and the three alternatives that were evaluated. Alternative 3 was selected by the Responsible Official for implementation. Since the 2013 ROD was signed, a number of timber sale units have been logged and subsequent implementation monitoring and field reviews indicate a need to make some changes to the decision.

Purpose and Need for Action

Additions to the purpose and need for action are based on project implementation monitoring and field reviews, as described below.

1. Field reviews have identified 1,330 acres of new loblolly stands that were not addressed in the 2013 FEIS. These stands need to be restored to native forest species appropriate for the ecological zone and loblolly pine (a non-native species) needs to be eliminated as a long term seed source.

2. Since the 2013 ROD was signed, 902 acres of loblolly stands have

become commercially viable and/or have road access to them that was not available at the time of the original decision. There is a need to recover any economic value in trees to be harvested prior to restoration of native forest vegetation.

3. As a non-native species in the Southern Appalachian Mountains, loblolly pine has proven to be an aggressive competitor and seed stored in the soil germinates prolifically following harvest and hampers establishment of native forest vegetation. The herbicides currently approved for use have proven effective for hardwood control but ineffective at controlling loblolly pine regeneration. There is a need to include both prescribed burning and herbicides as site preparation treatments that are more effective at controlling loblolly pine regeneration. This would facilitate restoration of desirable native pine and hardwood species on appropriate ecological types.

4. Implementation monitoring indicates that undesirable understory hardwoods (such as red maple, sweetgum, blackgum, rhododendron, and mountain laurel) are well-established in some stands. The lack of periodic fire has allowed these species to become dominant and persistent in the understory at levels not typical for their ecological zone. In addition, past Southern pine beetle activity that killed portions of the overstory loblolly pine has also resulted in these hardwood species gaining dominance of the site at the exclusion of other desirable species such as oaks, hickories, and native pines. Loblolly pine regeneration is also present and needs to be eliminated from the stand. There is a need to treat undesirable hardwood and loblolly pine understories prior to timber harvest in some areas to facilitate reestablishment of native forest vegetation.

5. Ecological classification mapping for the district has been updated since the 2013 ROD was signed. This new information has been used to help identify potentially suitable areas for woodland management. Also, establishment of woodland areas has proven to be more labor intensive than was originally thought. There is a need to reduce the total number of acres managed as woodlands and to use ecological mapping to identify areas suitable for woodland management. This would result in some woodland areas being changed to regeneration harvest and some new areas selected for woodland management. In some cases, stands selected for woodland management contain desirable hardwood species such as oak and

hickory but lack sufficient native pine species typical of the ecological zone. Woodland areas should contain a variety of ecologically suitable species of native pines (that include pitch pine, Table Mountain pine and shortleaf pine) and hardwoods with an open overstory and an understory dominated by herbaceous vegetation. Woodland restoration needs to include native pine species suitable to the ecological zone.

6. Implementation monitoring has shown the need to drop mitigation measure #1 from the 2013 FEIS. This mitigation measure provides for staggering some harvest units in identified small sub-watersheds to reduce timber harvesting effects on water quality. However, this mitigation measure has proven difficult to implement and has caused additional adverse environmental effects. Staggering harvest units has resulted in additional soil disturbance from roads. Instead of using a system road once during a timber sale and then putting it back into storage and allowing it to revegetate, another entry is needed a few years later resulting in additional disturbance in the watershed. In addition, there is an increased risk of loblolly pine seeding into the newly restored unit from the adjacent uncut stand.

7. Mitigation measure # 6c would be revised to permit log trucks to cross some perennial and intermittent streams using other methods (such as low-water crossings) in addition to temporary bridges. Implementation monitoring indicates that some crossings make it impracticable to use a temporary bridge without placing fill material on the banks of the stream. This fill material has the potential to be a sediment source once the temporary bridge is removed. The revised mitigation would require consultation with Forest Service resource specialists prior to proceeding with other crossing methods. The intent is to choose the best form of crossing to protect soil and water resources.

8. A mitigation measures would be added to protect residual trees during site preparation prescribed burn treatments and another mitigation measure would be added to require hand fireline construction near streams.

Proposed Action

The proposed action includes adding about 1,330 acres of new loblolly stand treatments, modifying loblolly treatments on 902 acres from pre-commercial to commercial treatments, reducing the acres to be managed as woodlands, adding planting of native pines in woodlands, adding two herbicides (that are already approved for

Forest Service use) to more effectively manage understory vegetation, adding prescribed fire, and modifying or adding mitigation measures to protect resources.

Regeneration Harvest, with Reserves (cut-and-remove): Commercial timber harvest would occur on an additional 1,330 acres. Unmerchantable loblolly pine and other undesirable species would be cut down by manual (saws, hand tools) or mechanized felling equipment. In addition, to cutting loblolly pine, harvest would also include Virginia pine, white pine, red maple, sourwood, blackgum, mountain laurel, rhododendron, yellow-poplar and other less desirable hardwoods. The intent of cutting from these associated species is to limit their abundance and achieve a mix of species typical of natural forest conditions. Desirable dominant and co-dominant oaks, hickories, shortleaf pine, Table Mountain pine, and pitch pine of good vigor would be retained where possible unless removal is necessary for safety or for equipment operability reasons. Site-preparation treatments would be implemented prior to tree planting. Shortleaf pine, Table Mountain pine, and pitch pine would be planted on some sites; densities would vary based on residual desirable species, site quality and consideration of the ecological zone for each stand.

Regeneration Harvest, with Reserves (treatments changed from cut and leave to cut and remove): Commercial timber harvest would occur on approximately 902 acres previously designated for non-commercial treatment. Treatments would be the same as those described for Regeneration Harvest, with Reserves (cut-and-remove).

New Woodland Stands: The woodland prescription would remove all loblolly pine and undesirable tree species including but not limited to Virginia pine, white pine, maples, and yellow poplar on 188 acres. The treatment would include thinning oaks, hickories, and shortleaf pine if necessary to a 30 to 60% canopy cover. Maintenance treatments could include prescribed burning, herbicide, manual, and mechanical methods as needed to achieve the desired species composition. Manual and mechanical methods include hand tools (chainsaws, brush saws), and/or heavy equipment (tractor with mower, gyro-track that grind up or masticate undesirable understory vegetation). Herbicides in combination with a surfactant and spray pattern indicator would also be used to control undesirable understory vegetation. Herbicides would be applied manually (between the first of July and

the end of September) via directed foliar or cut surface application methods.

Stands Changed from Woodland Treatments to Regeneration Harvest, with Reserves (cut-and-remove): Commercial timber harvest would occur on approximately 282 acres. Treatments would be the same as those described for Regeneration Harvest, with Reserves (cut-and-remove).

Woodlands Planted with Native Pines: The proposed action would include the option to plant pitch pine, Table Mountain pine and shortleaf pine to supplement species diversity in newly established woodland areas (631 acres). Planting would be done manually in small patches and densities would be based on the number needed to meet woodland ecological objectives for the site.

Additional Site Preparation Treatments: The supplement would include the addition of site-preparation prescribed burning and two new herbicides that are more effective at controlling loblolly pine regeneration.

Prescribed Burning Treatment: Site-preparation burning would be used to control loblolly regeneration typically in the first growing season following harvest in regeneration stands (4,369 acres). It would also be used to reduce competition from Virginia pine, white pine, and undesirable hardwoods. Firelines would utilize natural features as practicable such as streams or constructed features such as roads. Dozer and hand constructed firelines would be needed in some places to contain the prescribed fire. Stands that overlap with larger landscape prescribed burn blocks may be burned in the growing season or dormant season subject to landscape scale burning objectives. Burning would be done manually with drip torches or with aerial ignition (*i.e.*, helicopter).

Herbicide Treatments: Chemical site preparation would be used in stands that are not prescribe burned or where burning does not have the anticipated effect at controlling competition. Glyphosate and aminopyralid herbicides would be added to the existing herbicides to control regenerating loblolly pine seedlings and undesirable species as needed in order to achieve native species composition. Herbicides would be applied manually using the foliar or hack-n-squirt methods. In addition, pre-harvest site-preparation herbicide treatments may be used to control mid and understory species composition in all regeneration areas.

Changes to Mitigation Measures: Mitigation measure #1 which required staggering of harvest units in some

watersheds would be dropped and instead reliance would be placed on adherence to “*South Carolina’s Best Management Practices for Forestry and National Best Management Practices for Water Quality Management on National Forest System Lands*” and standards in the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan Sumter National Forest (Forest Plan).

Mitigation measure # 6c would be revised to allow log trucks to cross perennial and intermittent streams using other methods (low-water crossing) in addition to temporary bridges as deemed practicable and effective at resource protection with approval from Forest Service specialists. Crossings would adhere to BMPs and the Forest Plan.

A new mitigation measure would be added to protect residual trees in harvest units during prescribed burn activities. Protection measures could include manual and mechanical removal of logging slash from under the drip-line to the base of residual trees. A new mitigation measure would be added to protect streams by requiring hand fireline construction within 100 feet of streams when deemed necessary during prescribed burning.

Additional Forest Service System Road Reconstruction and Maintenance: Road reconstruction and maintenance would be needed on an additional 9.4 miles of existing Forest Service system roads. Reconstruction work would consist of but not be limited to graveling road surfaces, replacing culverts—including replacements for aquatic organism passage, ditch cleaning, removing brush and trees along road rights-of-way, installing, repairing or replacing gates and correcting road safety hazards. Road maintenance would consist of but not be limited to spot gravel replacement, blading, cleaning culverts, brushing and mowing.

Temporary Roads: Approximately 12 miles of additional temporary roads would be used to access stands. Temporary roads would be closed and the area returned to resource production after the access is no longer needed.

Fireline Construction: Approximately 8 miles of dozer fireline would be needed for site preparation burning treatments. Typically, constructed line would not be needed to control fire during the growing season site preparation burning, but key locations would need it (such as along private land boundaries next to residences). Additional information including maps on the proposed action are located at the following website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=53047>.

Responsible Official

Andrew Pickens District Ranger,
Sumter National Forest

Nature of Decision To Be Made

Whether or not to implement the Proposed Action or continue to implement the 2013 ROD.

Scoping Process

This Notice of Intent initiates the scoping process, which guides the development of the SEIS. We are inviting you to submit comments to help refine the proposed action. In addition, the Responsible Official is currently preparing an environmental analysis of the proposed action and needs your assistance to better identify issues, concerns and opportunities. Pursuant to 36 CFR 218.7(a)(2), this proposed project implements the land management plan and is subject to 36 CFR 218 subparts A and B.

Specific written comments as defined by § 218.2 should be within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and must include supporting reasons for the Responsible Official to consider. It is the responsibility of all individuals and organizations to insure that their comments are received in a timely manner.

A notice and comment period will be provided at a future date (§ 218.24). Only those that respond to this request for comments will remain on the mailing list for this project.

It is important that reviewers provide their comments at such times and in such manner that they are useful to the agency's preparation of the environmental impact statement. Therefore, comments should be provided prior to the close of the comment period and should clearly articulate the reviewer's concerns and contentions.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on these proposed actions 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.

Dated: February 28, 2018.

Chris French,

Associate Deputy Chief, National Forest System.

[FR Doc. 2018-06132 Filed 3-27-18; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3411-15-P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**Rural Utilities Service****Rural Broadband Access Loans and Loan Guarantees Program**

AGENCY: Rural Utilities Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of Solicitation of Applications (NOSA).

SUMMARY: The Rural Utilities Service (RUS), an Agency of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), announces that it is accepting applications for fiscal year (FY) 2018 for the Rural Broadband Access Loans and Loan Guarantees Program (the Broadband Program). RUS will publish on its website <https://www.rd.usda.gov/newsroom/notices-solicitation-applications-nosas> the amount of funding received through the final appropriations act.

Since the passage of the Agricultural Act of 2014 (2014 Farm Bill), RUS has only accepted applications according to discrete application windows as identified in notices published in the **Federal Register**. However, based on a review of the applications submitted since the implementation of the 2014 Farm Bill, RUS has determined that the use of application windows has not effectively supported the Agency's mission to finance improved broadband service in rural areas. As a result, RUS is accepting applications on a rolling basis throughout FY 2018. This will give RUS the ability to request additional information and modifications to a submitted application whenever necessary.

Applications will be processed on a first come, first served basis. Every ninety (90) days, RUS will conduct an evaluation of the submitted applications. During the evaluation period, applications will be ranked based on the percentage of unserved households that the applicant proposes to serve. RUS anticipates that it will conduct at least two evaluation periods for FY 2018. Because the Agency will receive applications throughout the fiscal year, subsequent evaluation periods can alter the ranking of applications.

In addition to announcing its acceptance of FY 2018 applications, RUS revises the minimum and maximum amounts for broadband loans for the fiscal year.

DATES: Applications under this NOSA will be accepted immediately through September 30, 2018. RUS will process loan applications as they are received.

Applications can only be submitted online through the RD Apply website at

<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/rd-apply> through September 30, 2018.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: For further information contact Shawn Arner, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Loan Origination and Approval Division, Rural Utilities Service, Room 2844, STOP 1597, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Washington, DC 20250-1597, Telephone: (202) 720-0800, or email: shawn.arnner@wdc.usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:**General Information**

The Rural Broadband Access Loan and Loan Guarantee Program (the "Broadband Program") is authorized by the Rural Electrification Act (7 U.S.C. 901 *et seq.*), as amended by the Agricultural Act of 2014 (Pub. L. 113-79), also referred to as the 2014 Farm Bill.

During FY 2018, loans will be made available for the construction, improvement, and acquisition of facilities and equipment that will provide service at the broadband lending speed in eligible rural areas. Applications are subject to the requirements of 7 CFR part 1738.

Application Assistance

RUS offers pre-application assistance, in which National Office staff and the assigned General Field Representative review the draft application, provide detailed comments, and identify areas where an application is not meeting eligibility requirements for funding. The online application system allows RUS staff to assist an applicant with every part of an application as it is being developed. Once the application is formally submitted, the online system will timestamp the submitted version and establish the application's place in the processing queue.

Based on the order in which the applications are received, RUS will review the application for completeness. The applicant may be asked for additional information to clarify aspects of an otherwise complete application or to assist the Agency in the underwriting process. If the application is determined to be complete, RUS will review the package for eligibility and technical and financial feasibility, in accordance with 7 CFR 1738. If an application is ultimately found to be incomplete or inadequate, a detailed explanation will be provided to the applicant.

To further assist in the preparation of applications, an application guide is available online at: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/farm-bill-broadband-loans-loan->