

Building Consensus and Developing a Strategy to Address Timber Damage on the Ocala National Forest in the Aftermath of Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne

Practicum

Florida Natural Resources Leadership Institute

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**U.S. Forest Service
National Forest in Florida**



Background

- **Florida's sand pine ecosystem**
 - Globally rare and rapidly vanishing
 - Supports many endemic species
- **Largest population of federally threatened Florida scrub jay occurs in Ocala's scrub ecosystem**
- **Scrub jays require early successional scrub 3-15 yrs of age without a closed sand pine canopy**
- **Habitat historically maintained by catastrophic wildfires now maintained by harvesting sand pine strategically across the landscape**



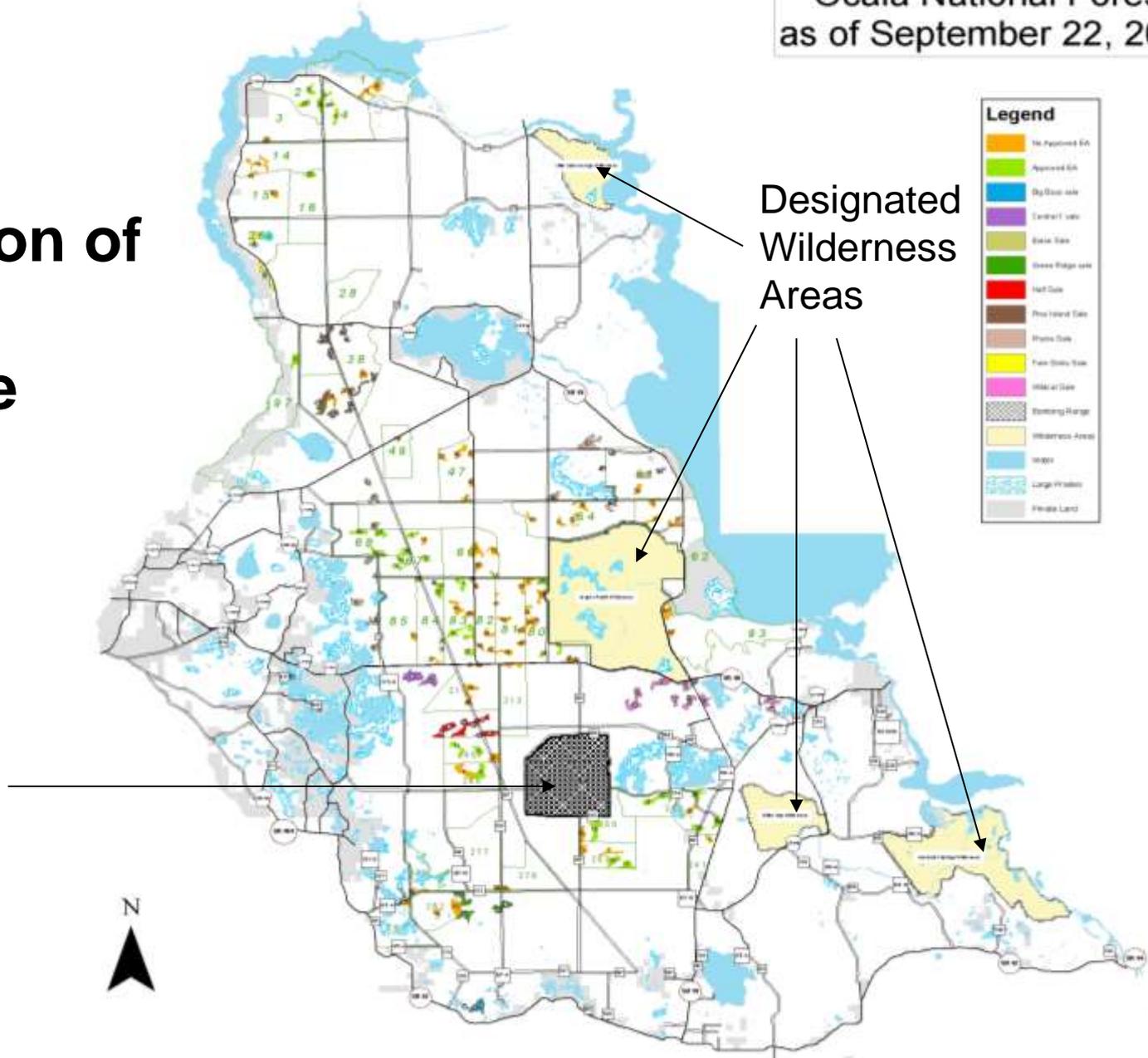
Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne

- Significant damage to mature sand pine stands
 - 50% or > tree damage on 5,400 acres out of 9,800 acres
- Urgent need to salvage damaged timber
 - Limited merchantability and short shelf life of sand pine
 - \$ Harvest damaged timber while there is an economic incentive and opportunity to create scrub jay habitat
 - 💣 Excessive fuel loading will pose serious wildfire threat

Ocala National Forest

Salvage Flight
from Hurricane Frances
Ocala National Forest
as of September 22, 2004

Distribution of Damaged Sand Pine Stands



Designated
Wilderness
Areas

Navy Bombing
Range

Leadership Challenges

- **1,900 acres of active timber sales impacted**
 - Timber harvest is halted in active sales areas partially cut before storms pending determination of damaged and undamaged timber volumes
 - Standard methods for calculating timber volumes unsafe and not fast enough
 - Deviation from agency policy may be required
- **3,500 acres not planned for harvest impacted**
 - Same need to determine timber volumes
 - Time sensitive NEPA strategy required
- **Prepare and sell areas quickly while other areas off the Forest are too wet to log**

Identify and Engage Stakeholders

- **District Rangers and staff on Ocala**
- **Supervisor and staff from the Supervisors Office (SO) in Tallahassee**
- **Regional Forester and staff from the Regional Office (RO) in Atlanta**
- **US Fish and Wildlife Service**
- **Timber Purchasers**

Leadership Strategy

- **Facilitate a team planning meeting to build consensus and develop a strategy for:**
 - Resolving issues with volume estimation and administration of active sales
 - Preparing new salvage areas not previously planned for harvest
 - Determining best approach to take for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)
- **Involve stakeholders from**
 - Regional Office
 - Forest Supervisors Office
 - District Office

Preplanning Before Team Planning Meeting

- **Keep RO informed via storm damage assessments**
- **Prepare white paper to:**
 - **Clarify the current situation**
 - **Identify objectives**
 - **Identify information gaps**
 - **Identify potential issues**
 - **Identify potential solutions and alternatives**
- **Distribute white paper to District and SO staff before the team planning meeting to get other perspectives and to help reach consensus on issues and options**

Issues to Resolve: Estimating Timber Volumes in Active Timber Sales

- Agreement on best method for estimating damaged timber volumes in active sales, active sales halted pending volume determination**
- RO recommends standard method which is to recruise damaged stands**
- District staff and SO believe recruising is too labor intensive, too slow and is unsafe given the conditions**
- RO staff invited to tour damaged areas in hopes of identifying alternative methods**
- RO staff tours areas, grants authority to use alternative methods for calculating volumes (comparison of pre and post damage aerial photography)**

Issues to Resolve: Estimating Timber Volumes in Areas Not Previously Planned for Harvest

- **Seek agreement on best method to estimate volume of standing and damaged timber**
 - **Areas were not cruised prior to storms hence pre-storm volumes were not available**
 - **SO and District staff propose extrapolating volumes from similar stands of equal age**
 - **RO agrees to extrapolation to obtain pre-storm volume est. and use of aerial photography to obtain damaged timber volume est.**
 - **Bids can be received based on volume estimations**
 - **RO requires a method to determine actual amount of timber harvested from salvage areas to adjust sale price of timber**
 - **District, RO and SO agree to use weight scaling**
 - **Each load of timber must be weighed and sold by the ton**

Issues to Resolve: Reaching Consensus on a NEPA Strategy

- **Options outlined in white paper**
 - **Utilize new Categorical Exclusion (CE) # 13 for Limited Timber Harvest**
 - **Utilize new CE # 11 under the Healthy Forest Initiative and Healthy Forest Restoration Act**
 - **Prepare standard Environmental Assessment (EA)**
 - **Prepare streamlined EA for Limited Timber Harvest under recent guidance from CEQ**
- **Team identifies 5th option during meeting**
 - **Seek alternative NEPA arrangement from CEQ**

NEPA Options:

Use of Categorical Exclusion Number 13

- **Pros and Cons**
 - Recently created, allows timber harvest up to 250 ac. without an EA
 - Preferred option of some district staff because it is quicker than other NEPA options, SO staff anticipated this
 - Damaged stands were individually less than 250 acres but cumulatively were over 3,330 ac.
 - Using the CE would constitute segmenting the one project into many projects and would violate agency policy
 - SO cautioned District against this approach, some District staff perceived this as a lack of support by the SO for the project
- **Option eliminated by team**
 - A copy of Federal Register was on hand which supported the SO's position and helped the team eliminate CE 13 as an option

NEPA Options:

Use of Categorical Exclusion Number 11

- **Pros and Cons**
 - Recently created, allows up to 1,000 ac. of fuel treatments without an EA to reduce hazard fuels in Wildland Urban Interface (WUI)
 - Was originally one of the preferred options because it was thought to be quicker than other NEPA options
 - Closer examination revealed that use of the CE requires extensive public collaboration
- **Option eliminated by team**
 - Team realized there was not enough time for public collaboration
 - Most damaged areas were not in the WUI

NEPA Options:

Requesting Alternative NEPA Arrangements with the CEQ

- **The District Ranger proposed this as an option**
- **Never been done before in Florida**
- **Conference with RO Directors to learn more**
- **Pros and Cons**
 - **Quick, project could begin as soon as approval granted from CEQ**
 - **Only done twice before in Region**
 - **Both instances involved large amount of timber damage (103,000 acres in Texas and 500,000 acres Arkansas)**
- **Option eliminated by team**
 - **Team realized our 3,300 acres was very small in comparison**
 - **Our situation did not pose as serious a threat to human health and safety as the other two instances and didn't warrant going to CEQ**

NEPA Options:

Using a Standard Environmental Assessment

- **Pros and Cons**
 - More time consuming compared to other NEPA options
 - May not be quick enough for timber to be harvested before it lost its' merchantability
 - Project could be appealed resulting in a stay
 - Would be the preferred option for anyone opposed to project
- **Option eliminated by team**
 - Team realized that this option would not be quick enough

NEPA Options:

Preparing a Streamlined Environmental Assessment Under CEQ Guidance

- **CEQ recently issued guidance allowing for a streamlined EA process**
- **Request emergency exemption for the project from the RO**
- **Pros and Cons**
 - **Allows the combining of scoping with the notice and comment period which reduces the normal timeline for an EA by 30 days**
 - **Emergency exemption will allow the project to be implemented before the 105 day appeal process is completed**
- **Option selected by team**
 - **This was used successfully on the Osceola National Forest to salvage timber killed by a wildfire, project completed in just 63 days**
 - **Option was unanimously selected by the team**

Lessons Learned

- **Communicate with stakeholders early and often**
- **Time spent planning before the meeting is time well spent**
- **Run the meeting, keep group focused and on task while showing respect to those in authority**
- **Use active listening, ensure all team members have an opportunity to be heard and are understood**
- **Review action items and ensure the persons assigned understand them and their due dates**
- **Developing effective relationships and earning the respect of stakeholders long before a crisis emerges is invaluable**