

Decision Memo

Restore Act Land Acquisition

USDA Forest Service National Forests in Mississippi

Background

A broad coalition of federal, state, and municipal government agencies and private conservation organizations have developed a strategy to restore and conserve habitat and water quality while providing economic opportunity in the Mississippi coastal plain. Restoring the health and resiliency of ecosystems within the coastal plain will help rehabilitate coastal wetlands and estuaries affected by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. These projects complement those included in the state of Mississippi's comprehensive plan for restoration. The state has recognized the value of previous ecosystem restoration efforts, which have included habitat conservation, restoration, and enhancement in addition to projects focused on coastal freshwater input and hydrology.

The Strategic Land Protection, Conservation, and Enhancement of Priority Gulf Coast Landscapes in MS is a collection of regionally scalable projects that; 1) plan and prioritize restoration opportunities, 2) implement restoration projects on public and private lands, and 3) create a foundation for future restoration and conservation projects. Planning and prioritization will be accomplished through development of an ecosystem modeling application. Restoration projects will be implemented throughout the Mississippi coastal plain and will include longleaf pine, coastal savanna, pitcher plant bog, bottomland hardwood forest, and mesic slope forest restoration. These forested ecosystems provide habitat for numerous threatened and endangered plants and animals.

This proposal represents one of the first phase projects of a multi-phase landscape scale ecosystem restoration strategy for the Mississippi coastal plain.

The National Forests in Mississippi encompasses almost 1.2 million acres, but the makeup of the national forests is a series of widely separated ranger districts scattered across the state. Even within districts, national forest boundaries are not contiguous. Land ownership is generally a fragmented pattern of small isolated parcels of private lands interspersed with National Forest System lands. Although the areas around the National Forests in Mississippi still retain a rural character, changes are expected as the population in the state continues to grow and urban development spreads into rural areas. In recent years, there have been increasing numbers of people moving in closer proximity to National Forest System lands, especially from expanding developments along the gulf coast and near urban centers such as Memphis, Tennessee and Jackson, Mississippi. Due to the effects of Hurricane Katrina, rebuilding efforts in many locations moved inland from the gulf coast, placing future homes and business construction closer to national forest boundaries, particularly along the De Soto National Forest.

This pattern of noncontiguous land holdings plus mixed ownership and growing wildland-urban interface presents problems in conducting effective vegetation management programs. Control of

invasive species, insects, and diseases is more difficult if untreated properties adjacent to the Forests provide continued opportunities for reinfestation. Prescribed burning to reduce fuel hazards and restore desired ecosystems creates smoke that can be minimized but not eliminated from impacting nearby roadways and homes. Restoration of ecosystems for wildlife and uncommon species often requires large blocks of appropriate habitat that are buffered from conflicting land uses. Protection and improvement of water quality, soil erosion, and sedimentation on the National Forests in Mississippi may be undone by upstream activities and offsite sources. In parts of the Forests where inholdings are common, there is also an increased potential for boundary line conflicts, easement and access issues, encroachment, and the need for more special use permits.

By creating a larger consolidated land base, the National Forests in Mississippi can not only enhance resource protection and management operations but also reduce boundary conflicts and access issues.

The Desired Condition for Lands identified in the National Forests in Mississippi 2014 Land and Resource Management Plan states:

National Forest System lands within the boundaries of the National Forests in Mississippi are more consolidated, with key parcels of land added to the National Forest System as opportunities arise. The land base of the National Forests in Mississippi is sufficient to protect native ecosystems, provide critical habitat, support diverse species, provide a variety of recreation experiences, and preserve a natural-appearing setting. Isolated tracts with special resource values are also part of the land base. Private landowners have appropriate access to their property, and the public has appropriate access to National Forest System lands. Boundaries are clearly marked so that national forest land ownership is easily recognized along property lines with adjoining tracts.

This proposal includes acquisition of the following tracts of land within or adjacent to the National Forests in Mississippi. The total acres are approximately 3,150. The lands in question are all within the De Soto National Forest Priority Land Acquisition area (see attached map):

Many of the priority acquisition tracts on the De Soto Ranger District are within the Coastal Streams Basin, which covers an area of about 1,650 square miles. Unlike most of the other basins in Mississippi, the streams and creeks do not all flow into a single main stream within the basin. Instead, most of the streams discharge directly into the Gulf of Mexico. The De Soto Ranger District is an important part of this system, containing the headwaters of the Biloxi River, Tchoutacabouffa River, and Tuxachanie Creek. The basin represents one of the most biologically diverse regions in North America and is home to a large number of threatened and endangered species. Both the endangered gulf sturgeon and Mississippi gopher frog occupy habitat within the De Soto Ranger District in this basin. Good water quality and protection of habitat are essential to support these species.

Decision

I hereby advise the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council that the categorical exclusion referenced below is appropriate for the actions described in this decision document.

I have decided to implement the proposed land acquisitions as described in this proposal.

This action is categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment. Based upon the information provided above, including internal scoping and previous experience with purchases, the proposed acquisition falls under the category described in 36 CFR 220.6(d)(6); "Acquisition of land or interest in land."

Based on a review of the Extraordinary Circumstances, no issues have been identified that would preclude the use of a CE for this project for TES, sensitive species, floodplains, wetlands, municipal watersheds, congressionally designated areas, IRAs, RNAs, American Indian and Alaska

No extraordinary circumstances described in 36 CFR 220.6 would be affected by the proposed land acquisitions .

If funded, this proposed acquisition will undergo additional internal and external scoping through the processing of the proposed acquisition. Resource analyses will also be completed by Forest Specialists. Based on the findings to date, the proposed acquisition would have no significant and adverse effects on these resource conditions. The purchase also involves a scenic byway and crucial big game habitat. The proposed acquisition is intended to maintain the integrity of all of these resources through management in compliance with law, regulation, policy and the Mississippi National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan. Therefore, the purchase is not anticipated to have any adverse impact on these resources. The acquisition meets the conditions for categorical exclusion as set forth in 36 CFR 220.6(d) (6) for which a project or case file and decision memo are not required. This proposed action is categorically excluded from further analysis and documentation in an EA or EIS.

Public Involvement

The RESTORE ACT was signed into law October 5, 2010 as Executive Order 13554 and published in the Federal Register.

In accordance with the law, The RESTORE ACT Council manages a public involvement process in order to generate input from local stakeholders, communities, public officials, and other members of the public throughout the gulf region. Widespread efforts have been made to ensure that these members of the public have had ample opportunity to share their views. The Council has hosted many public meetings and also established an internet presence to accept public comments.

Findings Required by Other Laws

This decision is consistent with the 2014 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Mississippi as required by the National Forest Management Act. This project is consistent with the Desired Condition improve consolidation of lands with the boundaries of the National Forests in Mississippi. In addition, the project will comply with Forest-wide guideline 4.2.7-5 on page 96 of the Forest Plan which states: "When compatible, manage new land acquisitions according to the adjacent or surrounding Management Prescription Area(s). The determination of the suitability of the acquired lands for the various resource uses, including timber production, will follow the plan direction for the applicable Management Prescription Area(s). When not compatible, conduct an environmental analysis and prepare the appropriate decision document to amend the Forest Plan."

Authority: The authority for purchase of the land is the USDA Organic Act of August 3, 1956 (70 Stat. 1032; 7 U.S.C. 428a, Sec. 11; P.L. 84-979); the Revived Economy of the Gulf Coast Act of 2011 (or the "RESTORE the Gulf Coast Act"), 33 U.S.C. 1321; and an accompanying appropriations act when funding is received.

Implementation Date

This project may be implemented immediately.

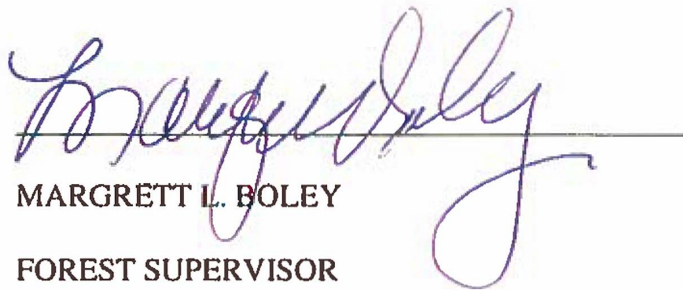
Administrative Review Opportunities

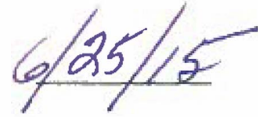
This decision is not subject to administrative review.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact

Marc Weathersby, Environmental Coordinator/Planner
USFS, 200 S. Lamar St, Suite 500-N
Jackson, MS 39201
601-965-1629

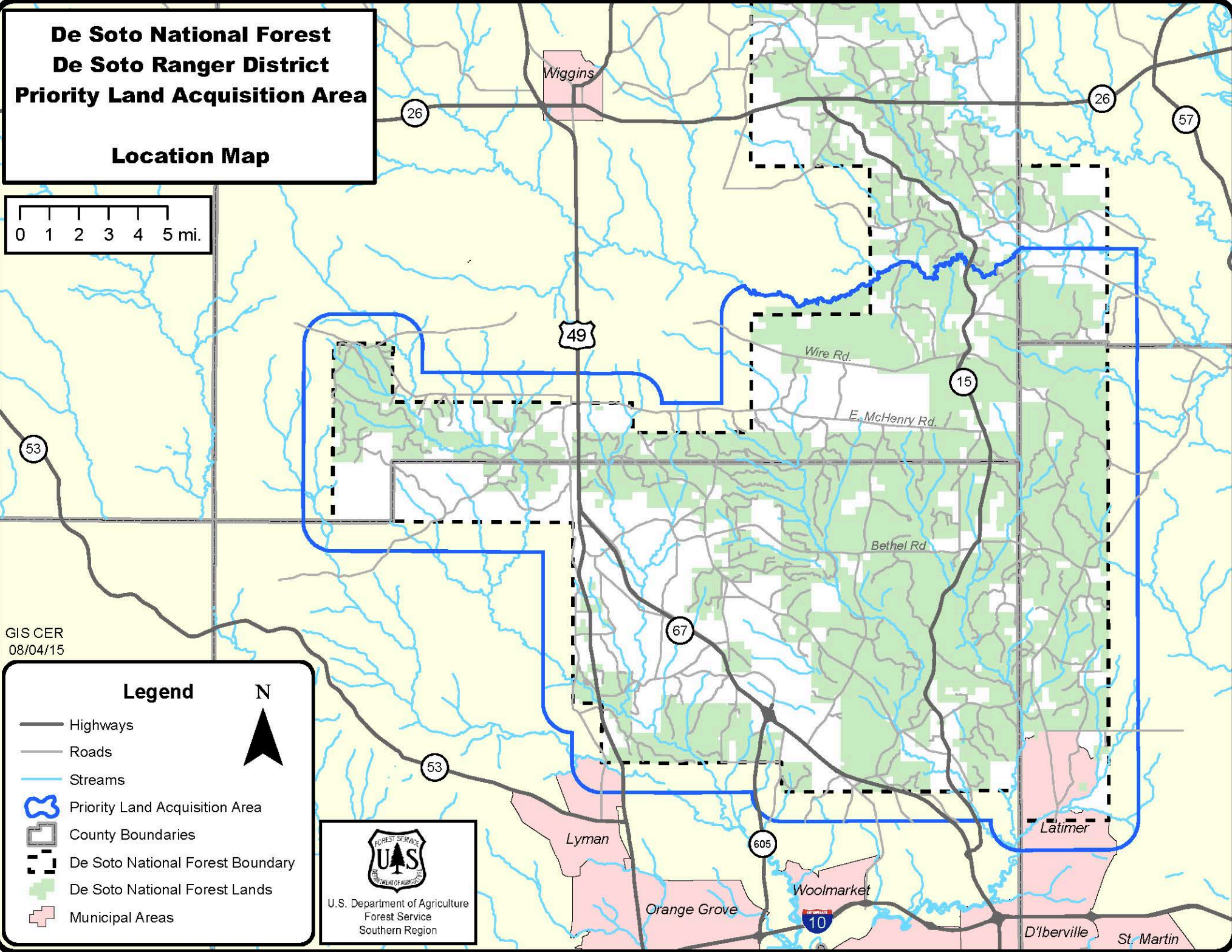
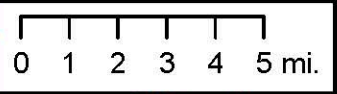

MARGRETT L. BOLEY
FOREST SUPERVISOR


Date

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De Soto National Forest De Soto Ranger District Priority Land Acquisition Area

Location Map



GIS CER
08/04/15

Legend



- Highways
- Roads
- Streams
- Priority Land Acquisition Area
- County Boundaries
- De Soto National Forest Boundary
- De Soto National Forest Lands
- Municipal Areas

