DECISION NOTICE

and

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

for the

Tallaseehatchee Bridge Project

June 2017

USDA Forest Service
Southern Region
Talladega National Forest
Talladega Ranger District
Clay County, Alabama

Decision

Based on the analysis presented in the Tallaseehatchee Bridge Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Talladega Ranger District, and careful examination of potential impacts of the activities I have decided to implement Alternative 1, removing the existing bridge and replacing it by constructing a single span bridge. The project area is located on the Talladega Ranger District of the Talladega National Forest in Clay County, Alabama approximately 0.6 miles east of Rocky Mountain Church on NFSR 607. The specific area is a corridor extending out from the centerline of the existing structure, 100 feet in the downstream direction and 100 feet in the upstream direction. The project area also extends east and west of Tallaseehatchee Creek for approximately 500 feet each direction along NFSR 607 to allow for possible road re-alignment and staging of construction equipment. Alternative 1 includes the following activities.

a) **Clearing of less than 50 trees and associated underbrush and shrubs.**

**Connected actions:** Implement erosion and sediment control Best Management Practices (BMP’s) consisting of silt fencing and straw wattles in accordance with Alabama Handbook for Erosion Control, Sediment Control, and Stormwater Management on Construction Sites and Urban Areas. The project area is located within a corridor that extends from the centerline of the existing crossing, 100 feet downstream and 100 feet upstream and extends east and west of Tallaseehatchee Creek for approximately 500 feet each direction along NFSR 607 to allow for possible road re-alignment and construction staging. Trees and shrubs within the construction limits would be removed using heavy equipment. The potential impact area of the project would be less than 200 feet wide and approximately 1000 feet long with actual disturbance area estimated at 0.75 acres.

b) **Remove the existing bridge.** The removal of the existing bridge would include a temporary diversion of water.

**Connected actions:** Mussels will be removed prior to starting to demolition of the existing structure (See project design criteria). Removal of the existing structure will be performed during the summer months when creek volume is low; temporarily dam half of the stream channel during
demolition and facilitate excessive stream flow using a pump; following the removal of the existing structure no additional work will be done to the stream bed or stream bank. The stream will be allowed to naturally revert back to a state in which no obstruction exists. Construction equipment in the stream shall be limited to 100 lineal feet (50 feet each side from centerline of low water crossing) measured along creek during demolition operations; limit construction equipment to this area.

c) **Construct a single span bridge**, a minimum of 20 feet wide, across Tallaseechatchee Creek, within a corridor that extends from the centerline of the existing bridge, 100 feet downstream and 100 feet upstream and extends east and west of Tallaseechatchee Creek for approximately 500 feet along NFSR 607 in each direction to allow for possible minor road re-alignment and construction staging.

The new structure will be designed to clear a minimum of 50 year flood event with 5 foot of freeboard. Subsequently, the roadway approach elevations will have to be raised. It is anticipated that the approach elevation change will increase from 3 feet to 20 feet. The approach lengths should not extend more than 110 linear feet on the east approach and 300 linear feet on the west approach. Guardrail shall be installed to improve safety, if necessary.

**Connected actions:** 1) Install erosion and sediment control BMP’s. 2) Clear and grub adequate area to construct bridge, and associated roadway (to stage material and equipment). 3) Excavate foundation for bridge abutments; all turbid water accumulated inside excavated area shall be pumped into sediment filter bags located a minimum of 50 linear feet from the BFW of Tallaseechatchee Creek. 4) Form and pour reinforced concrete footings, abutments, and wing-walls. 5) Use a lowboy to deliver a crane to install precast concrete beams, or form and pour cast-in-place beams. 6) Backfill behind abutments and wing-walls. 7) Raise road-way elevation to facilitate safe transitions onto and off of the new bridge. 8) Re-grade slopes and road prism, as necessary. 9) Replace road aggregate surfacing. 10) Seed native grasses in areas of disturbed soil. 11) Remove temporary erosion control measures. 12) Install guardrail if needed.

**Decision Rationale**

During recent bridge inspections on the Talladega Ranger District, engineers recommended replacement of the bridge structure located on National Forest System Road (NFSR) 607 in T21S R5E, Section 15. This multi-span bridge was constructed in 1939. NFSR 607 is open year round for public traffic and provides access for people recreating, hunting, and accessing private land.

The construction of a new bridge is necessary to replace a multi-span bridge that was constructed in 1939. The proposed project is an activity implementing the NFA Revised Land and Resource Management Plan and is subject to pre-decisional objection process at 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. This action responds to the goals and objectives outlined in the 2004 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (RLRMP) for the National Forests in Alabama (NFA), and helps move the project area towards desired conditions described in that plan. Goals and objectives established by the 2004 RLRMP NFA met by this proposal are:

- **Goal 8:** Riparian ecosystems, wetlands and aquatic systems are managed and/or restored to protect and maintain soil, water, vegetation, fish and wildlife associated resource values.
- **Goal 9:** Provide riparian and aquatic ecosystem conditions that are suitable to maintain well distributed viable populations of all aquatic species native to the planning area. Manage for diverse, balance, integrated, and adaptive aquatic/riparian communities, and provide habitat conditions to support desirable population levels and distribution of selected species (e.g. species with special habitat needs such as shoal, cave or spring obligates; recreationally important species; threatened or endangered species; or species of special interest).

- **Goal 11:** Substantially contribute to the recovery of federally listed threatened and endangered species, and provide for the conservation of sensitive species so as to minimize the need for additional federal listings under the Endangered Species Act.

- **Goal 35:** Provide a transportation system that supplies safe and efficient access to forest users while protecting forest resources.

- **Objective 35.2:** Prioritize road maintenance and reconstruction projects in accordance with threatened, endangered and sensitive species recovery and conservation efforts.

Federally listed aquatic species are known to occupy the stream in the project area. Replacing the multi-span bridge with a single span bridge will make debris dams less likely during high water events. Debris dams resulting from high water events eventually cause passage issues during the subsequent low water times.

In addition, a new bridge will correct safety concerns associated with accessing the existing structure during high flow conditions. Several times a year Tallaseehatchee Creek will flow over the top of the existing bridge presenting a hazard to those driving the road. The existing structure, due to its design, is also prone to log and debris jams after flooding.

In 2011, the Talladega Ranger District completed its Travel Analysis. The purpose of this analysis is to continually provide decision makers with critical information to develop road systems that are safe and responsive to public needs and desires, are affordable and efficiently managed, have minimal negative ecological effects on the land, and are in balance with available funding for needed management actions. All roads on the Talladega Ranger District were analyzed and rated by an interdisciplinary team based on their benefit and risks. NFSR 607 was rated as a moderate benefit, low risk road. The principle benefit, and purpose, of this road is timber management access. NFSR 607 also provides numerous ancillary benefits including access for wildland fire suppression, fuels management, public recreation access, plus ingress and egress to a local church. The decision was made in the Travel Analysis process to continue to maintain NFSR 607 as a maintenance level 3 road. The current structure at MP 0.643 on NFSR 607 is load rated at 6 tons. Recent bridge inspections have revealed structural deficiencies that limit the capacity of this structure to fulfill the intended purposes of NFSR 607 as listed above.

The stream banks upstream and downstream of the bridge are stable and have mature trees and shrubs growing on them. There is no indication of recent or historical bank erosion, stream widening, down cutting or aggradation on either side of the existing structure. The mature trees and shrubs on the stream banks help to retain appropriate channel dimensions at this time, and the
Forest Service has created barriers adjacent to the structure to prevent vehicle access to the stream to help protect riparian vegetation. This environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of alternatives to meet this need.

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) was evaluated against a No Action Alternative. Without the proposed management actions aquatic passage issues, structural deficiencies and public access concerns will not be addressed. The No Action Alternative does not meet the purposes and need established for the proposal.

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) meets the guidelines set forth in the Forest Plan Goal 8, 9, 11, and 35 plus Objective 35.2.

Implementation of the proposed action of replacing the multi-span bridge with a single span bridge will provide improved habitat for the federally listed aquatic species known to occupy the stream in the project area because debris dams will be less likely during high water events. In addition, a new bridge will correct safety concerns associated with accessing the existing structure during high flow conditions when the Tallaseehatchee Creek overtops the existing bridge presenting a hazard to those driving the road.

**Public Involvement**

Notice of and opportunity for public input and comment on the proposed action was provided by the following:

1. The Tallaseehatchee Bridge EA has been on the Talladega Ranger District’s Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) for the last year. The SOPA is published and updated quarterly on the National Forests in Alabama website.
2. A scoping notice was mailed out on February 25th 2014 to district mailing list and ended on March 28, 2014. No comments were received.
3. A legal notice of the Request for Comments for the Tallaseehatchee Bridge EA and draft Decision Notice was published in The Daily Home on September 11, 2014 and in the Clay County Times on September 18, 2014.
4. The draft EA was made available at the district office for public review during the Comment Period.

**Finding of No Significant Impact**

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:
1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial.** Consideration of the intensity of environmental effects is not biased by beneficial effects of the action. Potential beneficial and adverse impacts to the human environment were identified in the environmental impacts section of the EA (Chapter 3). The direct, indirect and cumulative effects of the proposed action on public transportation, botany, wildlife, human health and safety, heritage, and recreation under the forest plan were analyzed and discussed in the EA for significance. No significant environmental effects were determined to be likely as a result of the proposed action. Adverse effects to heritage resources will be mitigated as described in more detail below. It is expected that implementing Alternate 1 will contribute to a reliable transportation system that provides for public safety and quality aquatic habitat.

2. **The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.** Public health and safety will not be adversely affected. A major purpose of this planned action is to provide for public health and safety (EA page 32-33). The construction of the new bridge would improve human health and safety by providing a more reliable public transportation system. There would be a positive impact by implementing this action but the significance is hard to determine since we cannot know what accidents may have been prevented by implementing the planned action. State Best Management Practices (BMPs) and Forest Plan guidelines will be implemented.

3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** Proposed actions will not significantly affect any unique characteristics of the geographic area. There are no wilderness study areas or wild and scenic rivers identified in the project area. The project does occur in the floodplain of a small stream but effects to the stream will be minimal due to the use of Best Management Practices (BMP's) during construction. T&E mussels are present in small numbers but will be relocated prior to start of project and will benefit from improved stream flow. Aquatic resources were analyzed in detail in the environmental assessment.

4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial, because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the project (EA page 6). The overall transportation system will not be changed when the proposed action is implemented.

5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** There are no known effects on the human environment that are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown environmental risks. Possible effects on the human environment are generally known and well understood. The construction techniques will meet industry standards and do not involve unique or unknown environmental risks. The projects are within the scope of the Forest Plan for National Forests in Alabama.
6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration. All project activities are within the scope of the Forest Plan (as revised) and the associated Environmental Impact Statement and/or do not set a precedent for future actions with significant effects. Similar actions have been completed on other areas of the Talladega Ranger District.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. The possible cumulative effects of the proposed actions have been analyzed with consideration for past and reasonably foreseeable future activities on adjacent private and public lands. Cumulative impacts over space and time have been identified in the EA and are not anticipated to be significant.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. The selected actions will have no adverse effects on any sites listed, or sites eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources since this bridge is not eligible for inclusion to the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A, C, or D. However, it is assumed that the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built this bridge as they are believed to have constructed NFSR 607. Research indicates that CCC Company 3478 stationed in Chandler Springs, Alabama may have built the NFSR 607 as they were working on other roads in the vicinity. Limited maintenance has been conducted on the bridge but in some cases downgraded the historic integrity (removal of the wingwalls and replacement by riprap). By producing an architectural report noting the limited history of the bridge, as well as detailed photographs and drawings, we will establish a record available for study if future research on this artifact class is needed. This bridge is cast in place concrete; there are still numerous representations of this type on the Talladega Ranger District that served as expedient structures to facilitate rapid transportation for CCC enrollees across the forest. There will be no loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. Alabama State Historic Preservation Office concurrence and 106 consultations are completed.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Implementing this decision will not adversely affect threatened or endangered species, or result in loss of any other species’ viability, or create significant trends toward Federal listing of the species under the Endangered Species Act. There are federally endangered species within the project area and their habitat will be improved by implementation of the proposed action. A Biological Evaluation was prepared by the District Wildlife Biologist and concluded that there would be no significant effect on any endangered or threatened species. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service concurred with the findings of the Biological Evaluation.
10. **Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.** The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama.

**FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS**

National Forest Management Act

This decision is consistent with the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976 regarding the effective management, use, and protection of the natural resources of the area affected by this project, and is consistent with the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests in Alabama, January 2004.

**Administrative Review Opportunities and Implementation**

Pursuant to 36 CFR 218.24, two opportunities were provided to comment on this project and no comments were received. Pursuant to 36 CFR 218.4 this decision is not subject to objection. This project may be implemented immediately upon publication of the Notice of Decision in the newspaper of record.

**CONTACT**

For additional information concerning this decision, contact: Gloria Nielsen, District Ranger, Talladega National Forest, 1001 North Street, Talladega, Alabama 35160 (telephone: 256-362-2909 ext. 121 or email: glorianielsen@fs.fed.us

[Signature]

GLORIA R. NIELSEN
District Ranger
Talladega Ranger District

[Signature] 6/21/17

Date
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