



File Code: 2710/1950

Date: February 6, 2004

Ref: Public scoping notice to amend an existing special use permit to conduct a canopy trimming research project at El Verde Field Station on the Caribbean National Forest

Dear Interested Public:

The Caribbean National Forest (CNF) has received a request from the Institute for Tropical Ecosystem Studies, University of Puerto Rico (ITES) to amend their existing special use permit in order to conduct a research project at El Verde Field Station research complex. We invite you to comment on the following proposed activities:

Project Name: Canopy Trimming Experiment

Project Location: El Verde Field Station research complex Hwy 186 Km 19.5, Rio Grande, Puerto Rico.

Background information: El Verde Field Station has been a research location for tropical ecology since 1962. In 1988 the National Science Foundation established the Luquillo Long-Term Ecological Research program and El Verde Field station became a principal site for research in this program. Since Hurricane Hugo in 1989, a focus of research at El Verde has been on impacts to tropical forest ecosystems caused by hurricanes and their recovery from these disturbances.

In 2003, the Forest Service completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for administrative use, research activities and the construction of a dormitory at the site El Verde. A decision notice to issue a special use permit to ITES was issued in November 2002. The proposal for the canopy trimming experiment was received in October 2002. It was brought to our attention that additional analysis should be conducted to supplement the existing EA to address any issues specific to the canopy trimming experiment proposal that may not have been included in the EA.

Project Description: The proposed canopy trimming research is part of Long Term Ecological Research program and has received support and funding from the National Science Foundation. The purpose is to: 1) evaluate effects of predicted increased frequency and intensity of hurricanes on forest ecosystems 2) to understand mechanisms of forest recovery following hurricane disturbances and 3) evaluate the role of invertebrate and microbial biodiversity in forest recovery.

The proposed research can help to foresee the impacts of increased hurricane frequency and strength on the Caribbean National Forest (CNF). The experiment establishes twelve 20 x 20 meter plots and simulates the disturbance of a hurricane through trimming of the forest canopy within six of these plots and then studying the impacts on the forest and the decomposition of debris resulting from a "hurricane". No trees will be cut, but branches and stems of certain trees measuring greater than 10cm within the plots will be trimmed. The biomass will be left in some



plots and removed in others so that conditions and changes can be monitored. The total area of trimmed plots in the experiment is 0.54 hectare (1.3 acres). Total number of trees trimmed will be about 444 in the entire area. Tree mortality may occur but is predicted to be minimal. Canopy trimming techniques will be repeated every six years over a twelve year period, or possibly longer. In addition, studies will monitor components of decomposition changes in biomass during the recovery process.

Forest Plan Direction: The Caribbean National Forest Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) places this proposed project within a Research Management Area (MA 6) and Integrated Management Area (MA 4). Some of the LRMP goals and standards that can be met by the project include the following:

- Providing opportunities for long-term intensive scientific investigations, including treatment vs. control research. Such studies contribute to improved understanding, protection and management of tropical forests worldwide.
- Provide opportunities for all aspects of tropical forestry research, including small-scale manipulative studies.
- Completed experiments do not detract from future scientific studies or management options by leaving behind residual equipment or persistent chemical or biological changes.
- Wildlife, fish and rare plant habitat and population surveys and monitoring are conducted in a manner compatible with research goals and objectives.
- Studies are located to efficiently use the management area, maximizing the remaining management area available for future research

Potential issues and concerns: Some issues and concerns identified by ITES, Forest Service specialists and the public regarding this proposal include possible adverse impacts to endangered, threatened, or sensitive plants or animals; affects on soils; visual impacts; and the relevance and correlation of this project to previous and on-going hurricane recovery research.

Public Involvement: The Forest Service is seeking comments and suggestions regarding this proposed project. In addition to this letter, a 30-day comment period will be provided prior to any decision being made. Caribbean National Forest specialists including the Biologist, the Forester, and others will provide input in their respective fields of expertise for the supplemental or revised environmental analysis.

Public Comments due: To most effectively guide our planning process, we need your written comments by March 8, 2004.

Anticipated Decision Date: May, 2004

Desired Implementation Date: June/July 2004

Contact Information: To provide comments, obtain further information or to receive notification of the supplemental environmental analysis when it becomes available, please contact:

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We appreciate your interest in the management of the Caribbean National Forest.

Sincerely,

PABLO CRUZ
Forest Supervisor

Enclosure:
Project Location Map

/s/ Pablo Cruz