

ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT

STATE: Oklahoma

GRANT NUMBER: E-56

GRANT TYPE: ESA Section 6

SEGMENT DATES: September 17, 2008 - September 16, 2009

PROJECT TITLE: Mid-story Thinning to Enhance Habitat for the Red-cockaded Woodpecker on the McCurtain County Wilderness Area.

A. PROJECT OBJECTIVE:

Improve the quality of Red-cockaded Woodpecker habitat on that portion of the McCurtain County Wilderness Area that supports active RCW clusters and recruitment stands.

B. INTRODUCTION:

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker occurs in a narrow range of habitat conditions and suitable habitat for this species is limited to mature pine woodlands and savannahs. In the Ouachita Mountains, which comprise the northwestern most extension of its range, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker is found in mature shortleaf pine woodlands and savannahs with a grassy understory dominated by bluestem species. Over the past century, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker population in the Ouachita Mountains has declined as a result of habitat degradation. Widespread logging in the early part of the twentieth century eliminated many of the mature pine stands which supported Red-cockaded Woodpecker clusters. Through the rest

of the century, the remaining pockets of mature pine habitat declined in quality as a result of fire suppression and the subsequent increase in mid-story vegetation.

In Oklahoma, the last known population of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers resides within the state-owned McCurtain County Wilderness Area (MCWA). Mid-story closure and reduced recruitment of young shortleaf pines in this historically pine-dominated forest are two of the primary threats facing these remaining clusters. Since 1992, prescribed winter and spring burns have been conducted on portions of the MCWA in an effort to control young hardwoods and mid-story encroachment. However, it has become apparent that while prescribed burning is an important tool for maintaining an open forest structure, burning alone cannot effectively alter the structure of an already established mid-story. Since 1995, selected mid-story hardwood trees have been cut manually to create open, pine woodland corridors linking active Red-cockaded Woodpecker clusters and recruitment stands. The creation of corridors and the other Red-cockaded Woodpecker recovery efforts on the MCWA have successfully stabilized the local population, but the population has not increased as rapidly as hoped. Based upon observations of the habitat conditions at other locations across the southeastern U.S. where Red-cockaded Woodpecker populations are increasing, it appears that expanding the acreage of mid-story thinning surrounding the nesting areas is needed. This will improve overall habitat conditions and should promote increased woodpecker productivity.

Mid-story thinning and habitat restoration on portions of the McCurtain County Wilderness Area will complement on-going efforts by the Ouachita National Forest to restore approximately 50,000 acres in Management Area 22 on the Broken Bow Unit to a shortleaf pine woodland/savannah habitat condition. This management will benefit locally rare species including the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman's Sparrow and Brown-headed Nuthatch which require open, mature pine woodland habitat. Improved habitat conditions at the landscape level (e.g. McCurtain County Wilderness Area and Ouachita National Forest) will support a much larger population size and improve the prospects for the long-term viability of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers in Oklahoma and the western Ouachita Mountains.

C. PROCEDURES:

Potential areas for mid-story thinning were delineated based upon their likelihood to support a shortleaf pine/bluestem woodland habitat and their proximity to active Red-cockaded Woodpecker clusters, foraging habitats, and recruitment stands. The areas chosen for thinning in this reporting period were on the area's east side in Sections 13, 14, 23 and 24 T03S, R25E (Fig. 1).

Project personnel marked the boundaries for the thinning blocks and laid out access trails within the blocks. Most hardwood trees between 1 and 10 inches dbh were cut except for selected soft mast-producing species, such as flowering dogwood, serviceberry and rusty blackhaw, which were specified to be left uncut. Any heavy slash was moved at least 3 feet from mature pines to reduce the fuel around these trees during prescribed burns.

D. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Thinning work in this segment began in October, 2008 on the area's east side and occurred in the shaded areas shown in Figure 1. It continued until the end of the segment in September 2009. This work was accomplished by three to five temporary chain saw operators employed by the Department. During this period, approximately 735 acres (Fig. 1) were thinned. The acreages of the areas were adjusted by subtracting what, if any, had been previously treated. Since initiation of this project in 2003, a total of 4,986 acres have been thinned (Fig 2). Areas selected for mid-story treatment in the next segment, shown in Figure 3, total 742 acres.

During periods when high water may prevent crossing Linson Creek, thinning will be undertaken in area AX, located in the north west corner (Fig. 3).

E. SIGNIFICANT DEVIATIONS

None

F. Prepared by: John Skeen
Senior Biologist

G. Date: October 13, 2009

H. Approved by: _____
Alan Peoples
Chief, Wildlife Division

John D. Stafford
Federal Aid Coordinator

Figure 1. Area Thinned during the Period from October 2008 through September 2009. Total Acreage Thinned Equals 735 Acres.

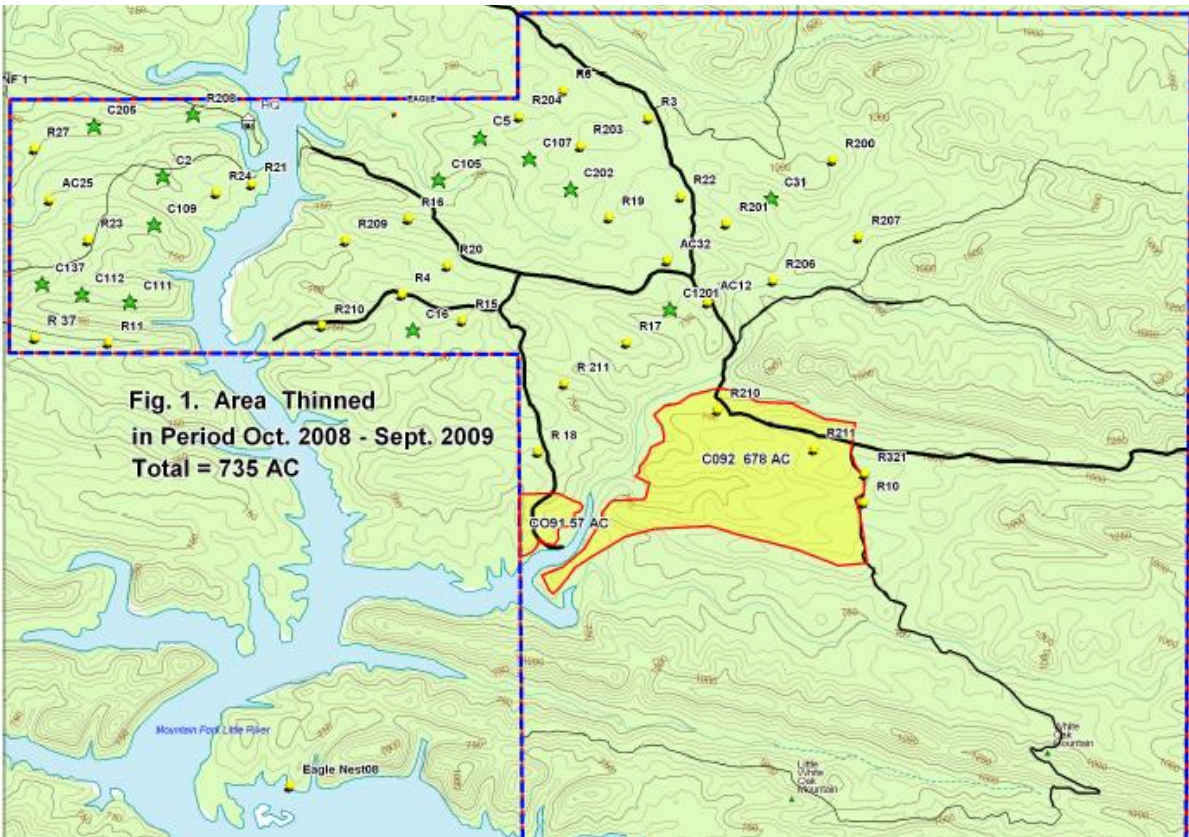


Figure 3. Areas Proposed for Mid-story Thinning During Project Year 2009 – 2010.



