FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
PROPOSED INTEGRATED NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT PLAN
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

1.0 DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE OF THE PROPOSED ACTION

The purpose of the proposed action is to integrate natural resources management with the military mission by developing and implementing an Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan (INRMP) that provides for the conservation and rehabilitation of the natural resources on Fort Benning. The INRMP ensures that Fort Benning can meet its mission needs now and into the future and that the natural resources that provide the training environment are ecologically sustainable over the long-term.

The Sikes Act (Title 16, United States Code 670a et seq.) as amended through 1998, Department of Defense Instruction 4715.3 Environmental Conservation Program (03 May 96), and Army Regulation 200-3 Natural Resources – Land, Forest and Wildlife Management (28 Feb 95) require the development and implementation of an INRMP. The Sikes Act provides the primary legal basis for the Secretary of Defense to carry out a program that provides for the conservation and rehabilitation of natural resources on military installations.

2.0 FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

An environmental assessment was prepared and evaluated pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (Public law 91-190, 42USC. 4321 et seq). From reviewing the INRMP and environmental assessment, I have concluded that the preferred alternative (Balanced Ecosystem – i.e., INRMP) does not constitute a "major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the natural and human environment" when considered individually or cumulatively in the context of the referenced Act, including both direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts. Therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

3.0 BASIS FOR SELECTING THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

I have decided to implement the Balanced Ecosystem alternative. This alternative is fully described in the Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan for Fort Benning. In choosing the Balanced Ecosystem alternative, I have reviewed the selection criteria in the environmental assessment, the Sikes Act requirements, Departments of Defense and Army requirements, input received during public scoping, and the overall vision and mission of natural resources management on Fort Benning.

4.0 ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Two alternatives were fully considered in the environmental assessment – the no action (status-quo) alternative and the Balanced Ecosystem (preferred/INRMP) alternative. Three other alternatives were considered, but eliminated from further study – maximizing red-cockaded woodpecker recovery, maximizing the military mission, and a recreation/wildlife emphasis. These three other alternatives did not meet the purpose and need.

No-Action alternative - The No Action alternative would not immediately change management direction or the level of management intensity. Under the No Action alternative, the Fort Benning Training Installation would continue to operate using existing programs and management practices. The following management programs would continue.

> *Forestry Management*: Traditional forestry management on Fort Benning is even-aged management. The objective is to maintain healthy stands. The trend is to remove the unhealthy pines, and favor the healthy ones, specifically longleaf. Even-aged management restores

longleaf pine quickly by clearcutting the off-site pine species and planting longleaf pine. Clearcutting utilizes high impact harvesting and site preparation methods.

Fire Management: The fire management program consists of four major functions – fire detection, fire suppression, prescribed burning, and trail maintenance. Trail maintenance consists of maintaining unimproved roads or trails and firebreaks to ensure access for natural resource management activities, military training, and recreation. Prescribed burning consists of planning, coordinating, executing, and evaluating prescribed burns. About 26,000 to 28,000 acres of pine and pine-hardwood are prescribed burned annually from 15 December through 1 September and is generally conducted on a two to three-year average rotation in burn units that average 300 acres. These burn units are distributed in a mosaic pattern over the installation. Prescribed burning is accomplished with hand crews and drip torches.

Threatened and Endangered Species Management: Fort Benning has five federally listed threatened and endangered species – the red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW), wood stork, bald eagle, American alligator, and relict trillium. Specific management actions for the RCW include the restoration of longleaf pine; growing season burning; cavity tree and cluster boundary marking; controlling hardwoods in the midstory within clusters; monitoring to determine population trends; artificial cavity installation; and the translocation of birds. Management actions for the bald eagle, wood stork, American alligator, and relict trillium consist of protection, survey, and monitoring.

Soil Conservation Program: A major function of the current program is to inventory and correct eroded areas in active and inactive red-cockaded woodpecker foraging areas. The program provides military units and Range, Roads, and Grounds Branch, Directorate of Public Works, with conservation planning assistance through the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The program provides technical assistance to proponents of projects, provides environmental review of projects as they relate to soil conservation activities, and manages soil conservation projects as they relate to red-cockaded woodpecker habitat restoration.

Game and Sport Fish Program: The main activities of the Game and Sport Fish Program are habitat manipulation, protection, regulated harvest, and monitoring the status of those populations by census and survey methods. Habitat manipulation/protection includes developing and planting wildlife openings (approximately 50); mowing, burning, or disking to promote native food plants; liming, fertilizing, and controlling weeds in fish ponds; developing fish attracting structures in fish ponds; erecting and maintaining wood duck boxes and other nesting platforms; and controlling excessive beaver activity. Various types of census and survey work are conducted to help monitor populations, determine trends, evaluate physical condition, and determine harvest goals.

Non-game species management: The current strategy consists of monitoring selected species, implementing specific management practices when required, and emphasizing maintenance of a variety of habitats to meet a wide range of nongame requirements. The major nongame species that are addressed on a regular basis are bats, the gopher tortoise, the gopher frog, songbirds, bluebirds, and small mammals. Two of these species, gopher tortoise and the gopher frog, require specific management. The gopher tortoise and its habitat are monitored and protected. The gopher frog population is being monitored and studied. In addition to bats, various species of snakes and armadillos produce numerous nuisance complaint calls that are handled by the Conservation Branch.

Pest management: The Pest management program includes the aggressive containment of insects and disease organisms that adversely impact the timber resources of the installation, while accounting for the potentially adverse ecological impacts caused by specific containment methods. It consists of attempts to eradicate, or contain to the extent attainable, kudzu. Integrated Pest Management also consists of activities for those nuisance vertebrate animals in the cantonment areas that the Conservation Branch is the responsible organization. Integrated Pest Management also entails an approach in the conduct of pest management operations on the

Follow Me Golf Course that achieves a balance between acceptable playing conditions and the associated unavoidable use of pesticides and the conservation of plant and animal habitat.

Cultural Resources Management: All ground disturbing activities associated with natural resources management may trigger cultural resources compliance requirements. The project or "undertaking" is examined to determine if there will be an effect on a cultural resource that is subject to one or more Federal laws, regulations, or guidelines. The use of best cultural resource management practices, such as avoiding ground disturbance on archeological sites, is a prerequisite for the protection of cultural resources.

The preferred (Balanced Ecosystem) alternative, proposes changes to several of the programs. These changes are summarized in the following paragraphs.

Forestry Management: Forest management would shift over the next 50 years to pine stands being regulated through single tree selection on a regular basis. This includes reducing volume and basal area to an amount acceptable to the carrying capacity of the site and within guidelines for management of the red-cockaded woodpecker. Maintaining and producing adequate red-cockaded woodpecker habitat will be a major focus in the development and implementation of the long-term management scheme. Timber harvesting would be concentrated on thinning overstocked areas that are more susceptible to pine bark beetle attack and salvage of insect infested, diseased, dead, and dying trees. Harvesting systems would shift to less impacting methods such as cut-to-length. Hardwood stands would be passively managed, rather than regulated for timber yield.

Fire Management: The prescribed burning program would continue to function as described in the No-Action alternative. Emphasis would be placed on timing the frequency, season, and manner of burning that best perpetuates the longleaf pine and pine-bluestem ecosystems and promotes overall native biodiversity. New firebreaks would be limited.

Threatened and Endangered Species Management: Program initiatives include implementation of the provisions in completed Endangered Species Management Plans (Appendix B8 in the INRMP). RCW initiatives include creating a forest stand model and evaluating and implementing uneven-aged forest management techniques. Bald eagle initiatives include improved nest site protection, increased monitoring of nest site(s), selective thinning around individual trees to create additional nesting opportunities, and determining the predominate flight directions and flight altitudes of adult eagles. Wood stork initiatives include evaluating sites for potential impoundment to be used as feeding sites. Relict trillium initiatives include increasing population monitoring, controlling feral swine population, determining the effects of silvicultural and military training-related activities on the population, and monitoring the encroachment of Japanese honeysuckle and kudzu. American alligator initiatives include verifying that nesting is occurring on Fort Benning and developing an improved protection strategy.

Soil Conservation Program: Under this alternative, the conservationist would function as a gatekeeper for enforcing, when applicable, submission and approval of soil conservation plans. The new procedure would require that a soil conservation plan be submitted and approved before concurrence can be granted on a Record of Environmental Consideration. A soil conservation plan would also be required during major military exercises (such as Victory Focus and Marne Focus). The Program would also develop a management program for borrow areas, and a comprehensive road closure plan to reduce erosion and sedimentation from abandoned or infrequently used trails and roads.

Game and Sport Fish Management: The Game and Sport fish management program would become integrated into an ecosystem based concept of management. The program would be increased to an appropriate size without becoming too large or conflicting with military training or threatened and endangered species management. Overall, the fisheries program would improve by managing specific ponds more intensively for weed control, improved access and facilities,

and stocking with native species. The hunting program would improve through additional outreach efforts to hunters, possible opportunities for additional special hunts (e.g., for disabled hunters, youth hunters), improved access to hunting areas, open hunting to all Georgia and Alabama National Guard and Reservists, and possible increases in permit fees. Wildlife openings would increase overall and would utilize multi-purpose existing and temporary openings for wildlife planting. Only non-invasive species would be used for wildlife plantings, and Best Management Practices would be followed to ensure low impact techniques are used. Management Emphasis Areas would be developed to focus efforts for deer and quail. Monitoring and census of game populations would increase to gauge effectiveness of management activities. Some hardwood areas would be designated for conservation.

Non-Game Species: This program would be expanded if support (personnel and funding) becomes available. Additional monitoring would take place and habitat management plans would be developed for selected species. Research would be conducted to study the impacts of training on gopher tortoises, and to better identify gopher frog range and habitat.

Pest Management: The main initiative for the Pest Management Program would be to develop and implement a comprehensive, integrated pest management plan that manages problematic species, and minimizes or eliminates their adverse impacts to natural resources. Using integrated pest management techniques would potentially reduce pesticide risk and prevent pollution. A focus would be to contain undesirable plant and animal species and minimize impacts to military training, listed species, and ecological integrity. Additional focus would be to contain and eradicate, where possible, feral swine.

Cultural Resources Management: This program would stay the same as described in the No-Action alternative.

5.0 Anticipated Environmental Effects

Based on the Balanced Ecosystem alternative the soil conservation, non-game, and cultural resource management programs would potentially result in some short-term negligible negative and positive impacts and long-term beneficial impacts to the resources at Fort Benning.

Timber Management Program: All proposed forest management would follow applicable laws, regulations, and procedures as outlined in Chapter 10 and Appendix B5 of the INRMP. Georgia Best Management Practices would be used to mitigate effects from timber harvesting, site preparation, planting, timber stand improvement, and pre-commercial thinning.

Uneven-aged management as proposed would have fewer impacts to vegetation because the type of harvesting, site preparation, and planting would be less intense than that associated with even-aged management. The less intense methods of harvesting and site preparation would also reduce collateral damage to trees that are retained on site, which would reduce susceptibility to southern pine beetle infestation. Thinning as proposed would enhance wildlife habitat. The proposed passive hardwood management would also benefit wildlife.

Due to protection and monitoring of known Species of Concern sites, the proposed timber management would not impact these species.

Due to surveys, mitigation, and monitoring for threatened and endangered species, the timber management proposed would not directly impact any federally listed species. In the long-term, uneven-aged management would be more beneficial to the RCW because it helps to establish what is considered to be optimal RCW habitat. Thinning would enhance RCW populations by creating an open midstory and more abundant herbaceous layer.

The less intense silvicultural methods associated with uneven-aged management would result in less soil disturbance and the potential for an associated improvement in water quality. Since wetlands are avoided during silvicultural activities, no impacts would result.

Since uneven aged management would require fewer roads, there would be an associated decrease in potential for erosion and loss of soil productivity.

Timber volume may decrease, but due to the higher quality of timber offered, revenue would remain the same or potentially increase. Proceeds to Counties are projected to increase under uneven aged management.

Potential cultural resource impacts are mitigated by surveys prior to silvicultural treatments, and avoidance during implementation of actions.

Uneven aged management would improve the visual aesthetics of the forest, and therefore enhance outdoor recreation. Fewer access roads would be available, but this may be balanced with the availability of higher quality, and more diverse, habitat.

Fire Management Program: All proposed fire management actions would follow applicable laws, regulations and procedures as outlined in Chapter 10 and Appendix B3, B6, and B7 of the INRMP. Georgia Best Management Practices would be used to mitigate effects from soil disturbing actions such as establishing new firebreaks.

Vegetation would be temporarily impacted by fire, although the majority of Ft. Benning is considered a fire dependent ecosystem, and therefore needs fire for perpetuation. Hazardous fuel loadings are reduced with fire, minimizing impacts of smoke and reducing the potential for wildfires that may move off post. Moving towards uneven aged management may decrease the size of burn units due to younger, more fire susceptible pine seedlings mixed in with mature pine trees.

Prescribed burning would enhance the habitat of several species of concern since the habitat in which they occur is fire dependent. Those species of concern that do not occur in fire dependent habitats, would be minimally impacted because fire either is not used in those areas, or fires are allowed to burn with low intensity into the area.

Most of the federally threatened and endangered species would not be impacted by fire since the habitat in which they occur is not burned, or potential impacts are mitigated as described in the paragraph above. The red-cockaded woodpecker would benefit from prescribed burning since fire maintains and enhances the longleaf pine ecosystem.

Minimal soil disturbance occurs as a result of prescribed fire. The balanced ecosystem alternative has a beneficial impact on soil, since it would further reduce the amount of soil disturbance by using existing human made and natural firebreaks, minimizing the need for new ones. Very limited amounts of soil may be lost before vegetation gets reestablished on the burned area. This has potential to impact water quality from soil erosion, although following the burn prescriptions described in sections B3, B6, and B7 of Appendix B in the INRMP would mitigate any impacts. Since smaller areas would be burned, streams and ponds would have less potential for sedimentation due to smaller areas being without vegetation.

Dormant season burning has little impact on air quality. Growing season burns occurring during the ozone season (May – September) have potential to interfere with attainment status of the local region. Following parameters established in the INRMP would ensure smoke dispersal and minimize impacts to air quality. Fuel loads would be kept down as a 2 to 3 year prescribed burning rotation is accomplished. This would potentially result in less smoke being produced. The balanced ecosystem alternative proposes a potential increase in growing season burning which could impact air quality since it would be within the ozone season.

Potential cultural resource impacts are mitigated by surveys prior to prescribed burning and avoidance during implementation of actions.

Outdoor recreation benefits from prescribed burning by making the woods easier to move through, stimulating flowering plants, and providing a variety of habitats that support many wildlife species. While an area that has been prescribe burned may look aesthetically unappealing initially, green-up usually occurs rapidly.

The small amount of fuel used during prescribed burning has minimal residual effect. Using prescribed fire may actually reduce the need to use herbicides to control undesirable vegetation.

Threatened and Endangered Species Management Program: Most of the potential impacts resulting from the management proposed for this program have been discussed in previous sections. The Threatened and Endangered Species Management Program focuses predominantly on surveying, monitoring, protecting, and studying these species. All of the proposed management for the Wood Stork and American Alligator is restricted to these types of actions and will therefore have no impact on the resources of Ft. Benning. Most of the proposed management for the Relict Trillium and Bald Eagle is also restricted to these types of actions. However, control of feral swine is proposed for the Relict Trillium. The potential impacts from this control are discussed in the Pest Management section. Proposed management for the Bald Eagle also includes creating large, dominant pine trees for nesting within 1.5 kilometers of the Chattahoochee River by selectively thinning around individual trees outside of the primary and secondary zones of protection. This thinning would be very selective and a limited number of trees would be removed to release existing pine trees. The potential impacts from these proposed actions are discussed in the Timber Management section.

The Endangered Species Management Plans allow for expanded training activities under the 1996 Army RCW Management Guidelines. These activities would not impact any threatened or endangered species or species of special concern since known habitat would be protected and monitored. Expanded training activities would have minor, short-term, localized impacts to vegetation and soils.

The impacts from management actions proposed for the RCW are discussed in the Timber, Fire, and Pest Management sections. Mitigations for these actions that are specific to the RCW are outlined in Section F of the RCW Endangered Species Management Plan (Appendix B8 of the INRMP). Potential impacts from chemically controlling upland hardwoods are discussed in the Pest Management section. Potential impacts from the proposed mechanical control of upland hardwoods are discussed in the following paragraphs. All of the sites proposed for hardwood control would undergo an environmental review and documentation process.

If proposed management actions are implemented for threatened and endangered species management, the actions would follow applicable laws, regulations and procedures as outlined in the RCW Endangered Species Management Plan (Appendix B8), and Chapter 10 of the INRMP.

The mechanical control of upland hardwoods would not impact wildlife species. Hardwood communities are retained on the landscape where they would have occurred naturally without fire exclusion. Some hardwoods are retained on the upland sites, usually at an occurrence of less than 10 square feet of basal area. Controlling upland hardwoods restores the natural longleaf pine vegetation community. This is beneficial to many of the plants and animals that are components of the overall longleaf system, such as many of the species of concern.

Impacts to species of concern, federally listed threatened and endangered species, and cultural resources are mitigated by surveys and protection of known occurrences. Hardwood control is done for the benefit of RCW. However, the gopher tortoise would also benefit from hardwood control since this would open the stand and facilitate the growth of an herbaceous ground cover. Known Indian olive sites would be protected. Controlling upland hardwoods may impact individual Indian olive species, but the population as a whole would not be threatened.

Using Best Management Practices when controlling upland hardwoods would prevent impacts to soils, water, and wetlands. The control of the upland hardwoods would create an open stand that is easier to walk through, visually appealing, and conducive to longer distance shooting. Game species population numbers are remaining steady, or increasing, as a result of past upland hardwood control (Swiderek 2001). The perception is that controlling hardwoods impacts wildlife populations, which in turn reduces hunting opportunities. This correlation, however, has been found to be false.

Game and Sport Fish Management Program: All proposed game and sport fish management would follow applicable laws, regulations and procedures as outlined in Chapter 10 and Appendix B10 of the INRMP. Georgia Best Management Practices would be used to mitigate effects from a large majority of the proposed actions, including but not limited to, establishing wildlife openings, maintaining existing openings by mowing and disking, disking strips through longleaf stands, road maintenance and repair, thinning, and establishing hiking trails. None of the proposed actions would negatively impact threatened and endangered species. Relict trillium would benefit from the extended hunting season for feral swine. See the discussion under Pest Management for more details on feral swine impacts to relict trillium.

The previous sections that discuss impacts from implementing the Fire and Timber management programs also pertain to prescribe burning and thinning for wildlife, as well as establishing Management Emphasis Areas that involve unique burning and timber harvesting activities.

Wildlife openings and strip disking would benefit species other than just targeted game species. Since no wildlife openings would be established within the boundaries of Unique Ecological Areas, potential impacts would be minimized to Species of Concern and federally listed threatened and endangered species that generally occur in higher concentrations within these areas.

Controlling undesirable weeds would benefit native plant communities. Since the control would follow all applicable laws, regulations and guidelines, there would be no effect on other resources from this action.

Controlling beaver is limited in occurrence and only done in specific cases of severe damage. The overall population would not be impacted by the selective elimination of certain beavers. Since there are enough remaining beavers, and a plethora of wetlands, eliminating a limited number of beaver has no impact on wetlands.

Liming and fertilizing ponds benefits fish populations, and provides an increase in potential food for wildlife that feeds on fish and other water related creatures. This could benefit the Osprey, Bald Eagle and Wood Stork on Ft. Benning, although the benefit may be low since eagles prefer larger water bodies, and wood storks are rare at Ft. Benning. Liming and fertilizing does not cause lasting effects on water quality. Since the pond water darkens, undesirable vegetation is reduced, and the amount of herbicide needed to control aquatic weeds is subsequently reduced. Establishing fish structures also benefits fish populations. As proposed in the balanced ecosystem alternative, additional ponds would be limed and fertilized, and native fish would be restocked in the ponds.

Outdoor recreation would be enhanced by a potential increase in hunting access by National Guardsman and Reservists residing in Georgia and Alabama. This would potentially bring in additional monies for the surrounding cities and counties, and an increase in total permit fees collected. This alternative would also have an emphasis towards increasing the number of hunting opportunities by providing for increased plantings, more diversity in habitats, potential for handicap hunts, and establishment of special Management Emphasis Areas.

Pest Management Program: All proposed pest management would follow applicable laws, regulations, and procedures (see INRMP Appendix B11.7.6.1). When pesticides would be used, the application, handling, storage, and disposal procedures would be followed as outlined in Appendix B11 in the INRMP. Guidelines on how to handle spills and the human and safety aspect of using herbicides are also outlined in Appendix B11 and would be followed. Personnel training, certification, and record keeping as specified in Appendix B11 would be adhered to. When insect and disease infested trees are removed, Best

Management Practices would be followed mitigating impacts to vegetation, soils, water and wetlands, threatened and endangered species, species of concern, and cultural resources.

Overall, developing and implementing a comprehensive integrated pest management plan would be beneficial to all resources on Fort Benning. Limited impacts to non-targeted vegetation may occur from application of pesticides. Trapping feral swine could impact non-targeted wildlife that inadvertently get trapped. The benefits, though, of getting rid of feral swine outweigh the limited potential of other wildlife getting trapped. Removing diseased and insect-infested timber would be beneficial to the red-cockaded woodpecker, bald eagle, and wood stork by protecting their habitat.

6.0 PUBLIC COMMENTS

As a matter of local or regional interest and in accordance with part 1501.4(e) of Title 40 of the Code of Federal Regulations, a notice of availability of the Finding of No Significant Impact (FNSI) is distributed to agencies, elected officials, organizations, and individuals who have an interest in the project and others whom the proponent and preparers deem appropriate. In addition, a news release announcing the availability of these documents will be issued.

The environmental assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, and documents referenced herein will be available at the following libraries:

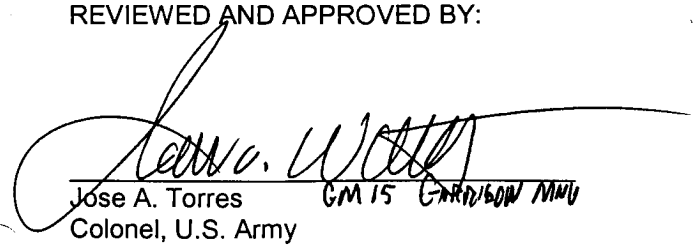
- W.C. Bradley Memorial Library, located at 1120 Bradley Drive, Columbus, Georgia. Open Monday through Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and Sunday from 1:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.
- South Lumpkin Library, located at 2034 South Lumpkin Road, Columbus, Georgia. Open Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and on Tuesday and Thursday from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.
- Fort Benning Main Post Library, located in Building 93, Fort Benning, Georgia. Open Monday through Thursday from 11:00 a.m. to 8:50 p.m., Saturday from 12:00 p.m. to 7:50 p.m., and Sunday from 12:00 p.m. to 8:50 p.m.

Requests for further information or submittal of public comments may be made to:

U.S. Army Infantry Center
Directorate of Public Works
Environmental Programs Management Branch
Attention: Mr. John Brent
P.O. Box 52358
Fort Benning, Georgia 31905-2358

All requests and comments must be made before September 31, 2001 (30 days after news release publication in the legal section of the daily newspaper Columbus ledger Enquirer).

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY:



Jose A. Torres COL IS Garrison MWR
Colonel, U.S. Army
Garrison Commander, Fort Benning

27 July 01
Date