

Major Issues Facing the Croatan National Forest

There are many issues facing the Croatan National Forest. Perhaps the four major issues at this time are:

Negative Impacts Resulting from Adjacent Land Uses

The Croatan is actually a fairly small national forest. However, more important than the overall acreage is the fact that major sections of the Croatan are fragmented by adjacent and interwoven tracts of private land. The development of these private tracts has the potential to degrade Croatan land in various ways, including the fact that the presence of adjacent residential areas makes it more difficult to carry out prescribed burning on Croatan land. Unfortunately, some very ecologically significant land lies along the borders of the National Forest.

Proposed Havelock Bypass

North Carolina Department of Transportation has proposed construction of a new US 70 bypass around (on the west side of) the town of Havelock. DOT has studied 3 potential corridors, and a DEIS is to be issued in 2010. The proposed highway will be about 10 miles long, with about 6 miles of length through National Forest lands.

Some of the major impacts that may be expected to occur as a result of the bypass (this is based on DOT's preferred alternative):

- The highway will destroy and fragment a significant area of red-cockaded woodpecker habitat, in an area where the continued existence of the woodpecker is already tenuous.
- The highway will bisect a significant state natural area, the Southwest Prong Flatwoods Natural Area.
- The highway will fragment another significant state natural area, the Havelock Station Natural Area.
- The 2 natural areas above are major cluster areas for several rare savanna plant species, especially ones typical of loamy soil conditions.
- The highway will destroy and fragment up to about 1000 acres of mature/maturing longleaf pine habitat.
- It will be difficult (and likely impossible) to burn areas fragmented by the bypass frequently enough to maintain suitable habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers and other savanna species; thus, secondary impacts of the project may actually be more damaging than direct impacts.

"Northern Carteret Bypass"

This proposed US 70 bypass will run from Havelock to Beaufort and will be up to about 33 miles in length. Tentative alternatives for the highway would directly impact as much as a 6-mile length of

National Forest to as little as about 2 miles. A highway constructed close to and parallel to the existing NC 101 (but not using the current highway alignment) would directly impact some of the best longleaf habitat and best potential red-cockaded woodpecker recovery sites remaining in the eastern Croatan. A corridor further to the south, closer to Walker's Millpond (and likely to be DOT's preferred alternative) would not directly impact as much Croatan land, but would cause increased fragmentation of a part of the National Forest that already suffers from a high level of fragmentation. (Because of the current economic slow-down, planning for this bypass has been put on hold.)

Suitability of Various Types of "Restoration"

Although the emphasis on the Croatan Plan is on restoration of natural (or pre-settlement) vegetation types (such as longleaf pine/wiregrass), there is debate about whether all activities being done in the name of restoration will indeed bring about the desired result. For instance, in the wetter soil types in which longleaf pine naturally occurred (most of these type areas were converted to loblolly pine tree farms in the 1960's and 1970's), silviculturists prefer to introduce (or re-introduce) bedded rows in order to increase the survival of planted longleaf pines. However, bedding can be very destructive to the native ground cover (especially wiregrass) that is needed to carry the fires to maintain habitat for the suite of rare plants and animals for which the restoration is ultimately being done. Further, the bedding may be very destructive to upland/pocosin ecotones, the major habitat for rare plants in the Croatan.