

## ASSESSING THE POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON CHATTAHOOCHEE AND OCONEE NATIONAL FORESTS



Forestlands across the region are experiencing increased threats from fire, insect and plant invasions, disease, extreme weather, and drought. Scientists project increases in temperature and changes in rainfall patterns that can make these threats occur more often, with more intensity, and/or for longer durations. Although many of the effects of future changes are negative, natural resource management strategies can help mitigate these impacts. Responses informed by the best current science enable natural resource professionals within the Forest Service to better protect the land, resources, and the region's forestlands into the future.

**Forest Health** - Invasive plant and insect species may increasingly outcompete or negatively affect native species in the future. Winter freezes historically limit the range of forest pests but higher temperature will likely allow increases in their number and spread. Drought and other factors will increase the susceptibility of forests to destructive insects such as the southern pine beetle. Certain invasive plant species found in these forests, including Japanese honeysuckle, are expected to increase dramatically as they are able to tolerate a wide range of harsh conditions, allowing them to rapidly move into new areas.

**Response:** Manage tree densities through practices such as thinning and prescribed fire to maximize carbon sequestration and reduce the vulnerability of forest stands to water stress, insect and disease outbreaks, and wildfire.

**Response:** Continually monitor for new invasive species moving into areas where they were not traditionally found, especially following events such as hurricanes and fire.

**Plant Communities** - Heat stress may limit the growth of some southern pines and hardwood species. Stress from drought and wide-scale pest outbreaks have the potential to cause large areas of forest dieback. Intensified extreme weather events, such as hurricanes, ice storms, and fire, are also expected to cause changes in plant community composition. Species such as the threatened large-flowered skullcap may be particularly vulnerable due to stress from Japanese honeysuckle. Species more resistant to these disturbances will be more resilient to a changing climate.

**Response:** Manage for a range of ages and species in forests to lessen potential loss from drought or infestation.

**Animal Communities** - Wildlife species will be affected in different ways. Amphibians may be most at risk, as suitable habitat decreases due to warmer, dryer conditions. A changing climate may be harmful to the endangered gray bat by impacting their food supply and the internal temperature of their roosting caves. Bird species, such as red-cockaded woodpeckers, may see a decrease in population as vegetation types change and heat stress increases.

**Response:** Maintain piles of natural woody debris in areas of high amphibian diversity to supplement habitats that retain cool, moist conditions.



Picnic by the waterfall



Mountain bog



Large-flowered skullcap

**Response:** Create habitat corridors, assist in species movement and identify high-value conservation lands adjacent to National Forests.

**Extreme Weather** - The potential for severe storm events is expected to increase in the future, including more intense hurricanes making landfall in the southern US. Extended periods of extreme high temperature and drought may lead to drier forest fuels which will burn more easily and contribute to larger and more frequent wildfires. More cloud-to-ground lightning due to warming may also increase wildfire ignitions.

**Response:** Identify areas that provide particularly valuable ecosystem services, like timber harvest or carbon sequestration, and are also vulnerable to extreme weather, like hurricanes or fires. Then plan conservation strategies (e.g. thinning, selective species planting) accordingly to mitigate for extreme weather impacts.

**Response:** Reduce increased wildfire potential by conducting prescribed burns.

**Water Resources** - Shifts in rainfall patterns will lead to periods of flooding and drought that can significantly impact water resources. Increases in heavy downpours and more intense hurricanes can lead to greater erosion and more sedimentation in waterways. Increased periods of drought may lead to poor water quality. Geographically isolated wetlands are critical wildlife habitat and can be impacted by changes in surrounding landcover.

**Response:** Reduce the amount of water taken in by surrounding trees and plants, using management strategies such as thinning and prescribed burns, in order relieve stress on isolated wetlands and streams.

**Response:** Relieve groundwater and large reservoir use when there is ample surface water during wet periods or times of high water flow to recharge aquifers, provide temporary irrigation, and decrease stored sediment loss.

**Response:** Restore and reinforce vegetation in headwater and marsh areas to help alleviate runoff of sediment during heavy rain, reduce climate-induced warming of water, and decrease water sensitivity to changes in air temperature.

**Recreation** - Environmental changes may negatively impact recreational experiences due to changes in the plant and animal communities that make those experiences unique. More days above freezing could increase tick and mosquito populations throughout the year, leading to an increase in vector-borne illness. With more days of extreme heat, recreation areas could see decreased use in the summer if temperatures impact visitor comfort.

**Response:** Communicate early warnings for extreme weather to protect vulnerable groups from health impacts, such as heat illnesses, and monitor for early outbreaks of disease.



Canoeing on Toccoa River



Fall forest colors



Fishing

# CLIMATE CHANGE AND YOUR NATIONAL FOREST: CITATIONS

Information in this factsheet is summarized from 50 peer-reviewed science papers found in the USDA Forest Service's TACCIMO tool. TACCIMO (the Template for Assessing Climate Change Impacts and Management Options) is a web-based application integrating climate change science with management and planning options through search and reporting tools that connect land managers with peer-reviewed information they can trust. For more information and the latest science about managing healthy forests for the future visit the TACCIMO tool online: [www.forestthreats.org/taccimotool](http://www.forestthreats.org/taccimotool)



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