Forest News

Georgia ForestWatch Quarterly Newsletter Spring 2009

More Than Ever Your Forests Need You

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From The Director

Is biomass a sustainable energy alternative?

Wayne Jenkins
Executive Director

I hope you found the previous two-part series by Darren Wolfgang, our forest ecologist, on the sustainability of biomass production from forests in Georgia stimulating and informative. This complex issue in all likelihood will become a more frequent topic for discussion in these pages and we hope across the state as the long term sustainability of Georgia's forests, on private and public lands, may hinge on decisions being made now.

High gasoline costs last year and the obvious need for more sustainable approaches to electricity production are strong drivers pushing the search for alternative fuels. The Obama administration and Congress are eager to get biofuels from public lands. Electric utilities like Georgia Power and private firms are looking for new opportunities to produce biomass fueled electricity and biofuels-biodiesel for transportation. Both products can be produced from pine trees, according to claims by their in-state boosters. Georgia has over 20 million acres of pine plantings that could be used for supporting these new energy industries. Plants are under construction and proposed across the state.

As Wolfgang pointed out, we should start all discussion on the sustainability of any forestry practice with a view to maintaining soil fertility over the long run. If the removal of trees and therefore nutrients is more rapid than the forests' ability to replace them, then a loss of key nutrients over time degrades the site and future potential production. This is nature's bottom line. Note, if we were removing no material, we would see a gain in fertility, over time, in most of the forests in Georgia. Forests are not static. On the contrary, depending on factors such as rainfall, climate, existing vegetation, soil type, etc, forests are great recyclers and stores of nutrients. They are bio-accumulators.

An understanding of basic forest soil science leads to the question then of frequency of harvest or removal of nutrients. The enormous appetite of industrial facilities producing ethanol or electricity and the desire of pine growers to be profitable will most likely mandate short rotations for harvesting supply materials. Who will decide the proper rotation cycles for any given pine stand in order to protect the soil? The land owner? The market? Guidance from the Georgia Forestry Commission? The U.S. Forest Service? If we do not get this part right, then we have only replaced burning stored sun energy from coal and oil with destroying our soil. This is not sustainable, although sustainability is the main buzzword you keep hearing in relation to biofuels.

In coming months, we most likely will see an energy bill from the President and Congress that supports and finances biomass materials coming from public lands. This top-down federal approach is not necessarily the best approach for Georgia with its vast private land pine reserves. The latest management plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests has key goals of moving unhealthy forests into more natural, resilient ones. Georgia's pine plantations will in all likelihood remain in planted pine unless they are bought for development. Should public forests compete with the private sector for supplying biomass? Once biomass programs are begun on public lands, how will they be curtailed when forest restoration goals have been met? Once the processing plants are built, do they become an incentive to put public forests into pine harvest rotations?

Perhaps things are already moving too fast to protect national forestlands in Georgia from the maw of biomass energy plants. A small 20 Megawatt plant is ready for production later this year in Rabun County, while Oglethorpe Power is set to purchase a site in Warren County for developing a pair of $400 million, 100-megawatt biomass electric generating plants. Warren County is mid-way between the Oconee National Forest in Georgia and the Sumter National Forest in South Carolina. We have not determined the supply sources for these plants but certainly proximity could increase the likelihood of public land harvests for biomass.

How do Georgian's feel about biomass harvests from public lands? How do Georgia's pine growers feel about the competition? What is best for a transition to alternative energy approaches and how sustainable are they? And lastly how long can the already diminished soils of Georgia's planted pine stands support large scale biomass production? ■

Wind energy update

by Robert Smiles, Jr. : Board Member

In the previous newsletter, an article entitled *Which Way the Wind Blows* promised a follow-up article after the U.S. Forest Service's proposed Wind Energy Directives were finalized. As of the date of this newsletter, those directives have not yet been completed. The Forest Service confirmed that the public comment period for the directives closed in early 2008 and that it had received over 5,000 comments to the proposed directives. Of these, the agency deemed approximately 130 to be substantive (the remainder were reportedly form letters). Currently, the Forest Service anticipates that the Wind Energy Directives will be finalized in Summer 2009. We will give you more information upon their finalization.

The directives will provide the Forest Service with a framework for evaluating future wind projects proposed on national forestlands. Even though such directives are not yet complete, at least three proposed wind projects on Forest Service lands continue to proceed through the regulatory process.

For the Deerfield Wind Project in the Green Mountain National Forest, Vermont, the public comment period for the Draft Environmental Impact Statement closed in November 2008. The public comment period for the White Pines Wind Farm Project scoping notice closed in October 2008. The White Pines project, which is located in the Huron-Manistee National Forests, Michigan, is expected to have a Draft Environmental Impact Statement available in May 2009. Meanwhile, the developer of a proposed wind farm project in the George Washington National Forest, Virginia, has reportedly begun the permit application process with the Forest Service to install a meteorological tower to test wind velocities and to evaluate potential bird and bat impacts. ■

Note: At press time, the forest supervisor for the George Washington and Thomas Jefferson National Forests denied the wind energy proposal from FreedomWorks, LLC, to install three meteorological towers to gather data in support of future wind turbines. The company has plans to build 131 wind turbines on mountain ridges across three Virginia counties.

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Cover photo: Lori Martell photo
Your presence in the ForestWatch family is making a difference! Together we're helping to ensure that future generations will have healthy natural forests to enjoy.

Message from the President of Georgia ForestWatch

Dear Friends of Georgia ForestWatch --

Now more than ever, your presence in the ForestWatch family is important to us. I thank you for joining as a member, faithfully renewing your membership dues each year, responding to our appeals for additional support when you are able, and for adding the power of your voice to this hardworking group of forest advocates.

What a huge difference you, 30 or so volunteers and four paid professionals have made!

Recent highlights from the "forestwatching" side of things include:

- After 10 years of hard work, the Anderson Creek OHV Area was finally permanently closed to the destructive effects of off-road vehicle abuse.
- The Mountaintown Scenic bill (to protect Georgia's largest remaining roadless area) has been introduced for the past two years, and we're anticipating its reintroduction again this year. We continue behind-the-scenes work to try and move the bill along.
- Our District Leader program, the foundation and backbone of our work, boasts experienced leaders who are now training several new co-leaders, to expand the program and ensure its continued strength.
- Our collaborative effort with the U.S. Forest Service over the past three years has resulted in better forestry, especially an increase in projects to thin overcrowded pines across thousands of acres of unnatural single-species stands. The goal is to increase diversity in these stands toward a more natural hardwood-pine mix.
- Our staff forest ecologist has dramatically increased our ability to challenge controversial proposals with sound science and research. In many cases we are the only group asking the hard questions about fire use, restoration forestry, wildlife habitat creation, recreation impacts, biomass supply, etc.

But, there's a host of other accomplishments that are not always so visible to our members. Together with your help we have made dramatic progress over the last few years to stabilize our 23-year-old organization for the long haul:

- In August of 2003, Georgia ForestWatch was in dire shape! Key board members and staff were lost, and with just $20,000 in the bank the organization had only about four months of life-blood remaining.
- Brand-new Executive Director Wayne Jenkins got on the phone and called; you sent money and said you were "with him." Several foundations and a few businesses pitched in as well, and soon things started to turn around.
- We found a new president, and today we have an active and committed board of eleven, with efforts underway to identify potential new board members.
- We undertook a professional revamping of our image with a fresh new look for all print and electronic communications and website.
- We began an earned income program with T-shirts, caps, and tote bags all sporting our new logo.
- We hired a quality staff to support Wayne.
    - In 2006 we hired Outreach Director Lori Martell, who manages our alerts, newsletters, website, outreach events, outings program, takes most of our photos, and assists Wayne with grant writing and fundraising. Lori is our "face" to the public.
    - In the spring of 2008, after a yearlong vacancy and hard search to replace the previous staff scientist, we hired Forest Ecologist Darren Wolfgang. He is contributing immensely to the science of our work; coordinates the District Leader program; helps write our responses to Forest Service scoping notices; and is our full time "guy on the ground."
    - In early 2009, we were able to make a smooth transition in our office manager position as Kathy Herrygers departed after spending a few days training Jill Gottesman, who jumped in up to her elbows. Jill is our "nuts and bolts guru," and the voice of our office. You can read more about Jill on the next page.
- We conducted a sponsored photography contest and published the winning photos in a 2009 calendar, which primarily served as a thank you gift for our loyal membership.

- Thanks to a substantial grant, we retained a consultant to help us create a master development and membership plan with the goal of a more sustainable financial position and an increased membership to help us advocate for the forests. We have begun rolling out this plan this year.
- That same grant funded the purchase of a new online database to improve data management, empower the board to be better informed, and help our fundraising efforts.
- We conducted a survey with all current and past members to see how we can improve and what you care about.
- Our executive director was invited to participate in the Institute for Georgia Environmental Leadership (IGEL) – a rare opportunity for selected environmentalists to meet and interact with business people and politicians in Georgia to discuss issues for building listening and communication skills and leadership.
- We revived the annual retreat and added a spring "Wild and Woolly" fundraiser that has itself survived a drought and morphed into an Author-Fiddler event.
- We are in our second year of the "Wild and Scenic Film Festival" in Atlanta, an outreach event to raise awareness of environmental issues and recruit new members. Thanks to many generous sponsors, the event has made money each year, giving us some needed support for our forest protection efforts.

A lot has been done and is being done. These are just the high points. Georgia ForestWatch is healthy and growing because of the commitment of our members, staff, and volunteers. Forests don't grow overnight. Neither do organizations. We will continue to feed, water, and protect ForestWatch.

In the coming months we will be working on some of the following:

- In 2009, with "Stimulus Plan" money due to flow into the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, we anticipate more projects from the Forest Service. We are pushing hard for these projects to go through proper environmental review. You'll learn more on this topic in this issue.
- The board will redouble efforts to raise funds and keep our work moving ahead and our employees cared for.
- In early 2010, we will embark on a strategic planning update for the organization.

Please know how hard the staff and volunteers are working to protect your national forests for you, for future generations and for the forests themselves. And remember – it didn't happen by accident. It happened because of the hard work of many, including your commitment to Georgia ForestWatch.

Thank you!

Peg Griffith
President

Welcome to new staffer

The Board of Directors and Executive Director Wayne Jenkins extend a warm welcome to our new Office Manager, **Jill Gottesman**. Jill is off to a running start, helping us settle into a new database and wade through the necessary world of data management. Jill is responsible for membership processing, bookkeeping, and all the details that keep our office running.

Jill holds a Bachelor of Science in Outdoor Recreation (Wildlife & Resource Management focus) from the University of Georgia, where she discovered a love for wilderness backpacking and the mountains of Southern Appalachia. Along her green path she has worked on a Pacific Northwest conservation trail crew, led hikes and horseback rides in California, and taught middle schoolers at a New England outdoor science school.

An interest in alternative education led her back to these southeastern forests. After years of working with adolescents in wilderness therapy and residential programs, she earned a Master of Social Work from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (Management & Community Practice focus). A field placement with the Community Foundation of Henderson County further developed her skills related to program planning, macro-systems social work, and nonprofit business management.

She has come 'full circle' back to the conservation field and is very excited about her new position. Stop by and say hello!

Volunteers bring trail damage to attention of U.S. Forest Service

by Dudley Sisk : Co-district Leader

Georgia ForestWatch volunteers and district leaders have recently monitored problems with various trails in the Chattooga River District and brought them to the attention of appropriate officials with the U.S. Forest Service.

Sourwood and Lake Russell Trails:
The Sourwood Trail, a very popular hiking trail in the Lake Russell Wildlife Management Area, has recently been converted by the Forest Service to a multi-use trail in order to accommodate mountain bikers. There is evidence of biking related vandalism, including painting of rocks and roots, raking the trail clear of mulch, and the addition of logs at entrances to bridges. Georgia ForestWatch believes this trail, easily accessible to casual hikers and families, does not lend itself to the athleticism of the bikers. We are recommending it revert to hikers only. The Lake Russell Trail (also in the Russell WMA) is permitted for hikers only. But the trail also has been vandalized – with trail bridge railings sawn down, apparently to accommodate bike passage. In this case, we have encouraged the Forest Service to properly post the trails for appropriate users and enforce its own rules.

Oakey Mountain OHV Trail:
Efforts by the Forest Service to close and restore a one mile segment of this trail have met with mixed results so far. The segment that courses adjacent to Chastain Branch in northern Habersham County had eroded significantly and diminished the health of that native brook trout steam. Georgia ForestWatch and Soque River Watershed Association had advocated closing the section for some years. The agency finally scoped the project and completed work last fall. Although the strategy for restoration proved quite successful, the closure was not. Illegal off-highway vehicle activity continues with some disruption of the restoration work. Georgia ForestWatch district leaders have consulted with Forest Service staff to revisit the site and work to modify the closure.

Dudley Sisk photo

An area of the Frady Branch Trail is heavily eroded due to being ill-sited on a steep slope and having no erosion control structures.

Dudley Sisk photo

This portion of the Chastain Branch OHV Trail was closed and restored last fall only to be reinvaded and redamaged this winter by illegal OHV riders. Wallace Wenn (pictured here) assisted District Leader Dudley Sisk with monitoring trail damage in the area.

Dudley Sisk photo

A pedestrian bridge, on what many believed was the "hiking only" Lake Russell Trail has been vandalized by removing a portion of the handrail to facilitate bike passage.

Frady Branch Multi-use Trail:
This trail, also in the Lake Russell Wildlife Management Area in Stephens County, long has been a very popular trail, especially with equestrians. Now, after some eight years of service, areas of the trail are showing stresses and revealing components of trail design that are marginal. Georgia ForestWatch district leaders have documented problems in the trail system and are discussing remediation with the Forest Service.

Hoojah Branch & Kelly Creek drainages:
Several heavily traveled illegal ATV trails in these drainages in the backcountry of Rabun County have been brought to the attention of the Chattooga District Ranger. In three cases, old log bridges had collapsed, with the ATV riders simply hacking new trails through the rhododendron to ford Kelly Creek tributaries.

"Badlands" Trails:
Forest Service managers from the former Highlands and Tallulah Ranger Districts combined forces several years ago to close a heavily-eroded track-way adjacent to the Ellicott Rock Wilderness Area, known locally as part of the "Badlands." On the North Carolina side of things, the old road was turned into a hiking trail. In Georgia, the Forest Service decommissioned the road and blocked it thoroughly. In recent months, though, off-road vehicles have punched and cut their way back into the area. Agency officials report they intend to monitor the situation. ■

(Editor's note: Co-district leaders Honor Woodard, David Govus and Joseph Gatins also contributed to this article.)

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Unintentional chemical consequences in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

by Wayne Jenkins : Executive Director

The last thing you might expect to encounter on a visit to your national forests could be exposure to toxic chemicals. But that is exactly what members of Georgia ForestWatch have recently experienced. Not just once, but twice!

Perhaps you recall from the last edition of Forest News that in October of last year two ForestWatch co-district leaders were hiking along a newly seeded, bull-dozed line which was adjacent to a stand of trees that, just that same morning, had been treated with the herbicide Arsenal as part of a forest "restoration" project. There were no signs or other obvious indicators that the treatment had been done and the forest users inadvertently hiked into the area only to find their hands, legs, arms and faces liberally covered by a bluish-green spray material. The district leaders reported symptoms that included headaches and dizziness. Georgia ForestWatch later resolved this issue by working with the Forest Service to ensure future stands treated with herbicides will be posted with appropriate warning signs to alert concerned citizens that herbicides have been used in the area, and that this will be accomplished in timely fashion. This measure is intended to increase user safety in the National Forest, and to avoid unnecessary exposure to herbicides.

More recently, in January, Georgia ForestWatch's Forest Ecologist was inspecting forest stands on the Oconee National Forest to identify potential forest restoration projects as part of our work in assisting the Forest Service in the on-going Large Scale Assessment. Accompanying him on this trip was his one year old pup Annie which roamed freely in the woods as Darren recorded forest cover and gathered GPS waypoints and notes. Somehow Annie found an un-ignited DAID or Delayed Aerial Ignition Device. These 1.25 inch ping-pong ball like polystyrene spheres contain potassium permanganate, which is an oxidizing compound, that when mixed with ethylene glycol, causes the chemicals to react and combust. The chemicals react thermally and usually ignite in 25-30 seconds. These balls are fed into a dispenser, generally mounted in a helicopter, where they are injected with a water-glycol solution and then dropped through a chute leading out of the helicopter. The DAID's are typically used to ignite forest areas during prescribed burning activities.

The DAID that Annie found had failed to ignite, due to an unintended equipment malfunction. Before anyone could stop her she punctured the device, and ingested the potassium permanganate crystals. The dog immediately vomited up the magenta-purple chemicals. Her mouth was stained with the purplish-black substance, and based on veterinary speculation her entire throat and internal digestive system was also coated with the substance. The chemical oxidized Annie's internal flesh, and caused chemical burns in her mouth, throat and digestive system. It is thought that minor internal organ damage was caused by this exposure, due to the fact that the liver and kidneys must filter toxins out of the animal's blood. The dog was taken to a local veterinarian who said that there was little they could do, and if her kidneys weren't too damaged she should pull through.

This harrowing experience is admittedly a rare situation and we have never heard of this happening before; however, this event raises several questions for the Forest Service and all those who frequent our forests. We believe these events should not be merely dismissed as "accidents" or rare "one of a kind" incidents. As the Forest Service increases its use of chemicals on the forest for controlling invasive species and conducting prescribed burning activities, stringent precautions must be used to avoid unintentionally exposing citizens and wildlife to danger. The District Ranger on the Oconee admitted that they had had a problem with the device that released the DAID that Annie found, which caused it to fail to ignite. The Ranger assured us that such instances will be dealt with in a more effective manner.

However, the questions still remain: How many more of these spheres are still lying around in the project area for other pets or native animals to find? Can anything be done to recover them? What effects may they have on forest soils and streams? In the earlier case of herbicide use, will the agency commit itself to posting treated areas with signs? We sincerely hope that these are the last such exposure to chemicals on our national forests and that the Forest Service goes the extra mile to use these potentially toxic materials safely and post treated areas in the future.

And yes, Annie felt better after a few weeks and appears to have made a full recovery. ■

Get to know your forests: An introduction to forest dynamics

by Darren Wolfgang : Georgia ForestWatch Forest Ecologist

This article begins a series exploring the basics of forest dynamics and various topics on forest ecology. Our goal is to help members better understand the complex systems and processes that drive our national forests in Georgia. Forest ecology is process.

Forests are wonderful and complex ecosystems. Ecosystems are comprised of a host of living organisms that work together and separately to create a living system. The fundamental philosophy that the forest is a "system" is at the very foundation of ecology and natural science. Ecosystems are broken down into more manageable portions often referred to as "ecoregions". The places where different ecoregions meet are referred to as "ecotones". Tree and plant diversity is usually greatest in these ecotones, due to the convergence of two or more ecoregions.

How geology effects forest diversity

Within these living systems, non-living things such as the local geology are fundamentally important. The historical parent rock material forms the mineral component of the soil that supports forest growth. There are many different kinds of rocks, all made of different kinds of Periodic Elements, which are further broken down to form even more variable chemical compounds and mixtures within the soil. For example, some rocks contain high levels of Calcium and Potassium, while others contain high levels of metallic compounds such as Aluminum and Iron.

The concentration of certain nutrients in soils determines the soils pH. The pH scale ranges from 1(extremely acidic), through 7 (neutral), and finally to 14, (extremely basic or alkaline). As rock types are the basic origin of soils, so different kinds of rock, weathered over time by natural processes such as freezing/thawing, rain, snow, water, and wind will produce soils with different levels and mixtures of nutrients and chemical compounds. Many of the soils in Georgia tend toward the acidic range due to high levels of rainfall that leach the important base elements out of the topsoil

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Get to know your forests

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into deeper levels. This single factor can be a limiting one for terrestrial growth. Yet our forests are impressively tall and dense. Interestingly, these very important minerals are deep mined by the trees and redeposited on the soil as leaves, twigs, limbs, bark, trunks etc. Note: a fascinating experiment is to stake a sheet out flat in the woods and visit and observe the accumulation of fallen material over several weeks. Even if it is not autumn and leaf fall, material is raining down nearly constantly onto the forest floor. Add to this whole trees, and it is easy to see how soils are built.

As a result of these various geologic processes Georgia boasts rich soil diversity. A common soil of the region is a very deep "sub-soil" known as "red dirt" or "Georgia red clay." This is an important advantage because despite Georgia's history of destructive land use, which was mainly cotton farming and timber harvesting, the soil depth to bedrock ratio is relatively high, providing an optimum condition for the growth of trees, though not necessarily for agricultural crops but good for trees. North Georgia is particularly interesting because you can see tree species such as white pine, black birch, buckeye and hemlock that are remnants of the last ice age and glacial period. The soils in Georgia are un-glaciated; therefore, were not subject to the scraping, carving, and glacial till deposition of northern states.

Because of the high variability of soil chemical and physical properties, living organisms such as plants and trees have evolved to favor the specific soil types they grow best on. Since there are many different soil types under our forests, there are many different forest types that grow upon them, and each forest type consists of varying mixtures of plant and animal species. Therefore, we have rocks (and the soils they create) to thank for laying a foundation for the amazing diversity of our forests. Geological processes help set the stage for all later processes supporting life.

Although soils are a primary limiting factor in determining which plants grow and thrive where, other factors such as carbon dioxide, oxygen, available sunlight, water (or soil moisture) and regional temperature levels are also important limiting factors. How might we measure this? The term "Site Index" refers to the growth potential and ability of a given tree species or forest type to grow on a given site. The Site Index is determined by soil type, which is determined from geology and rock type, so individual sites are more conducive to the growth and establishment of specific individual and species mixes. This point is illustrated in "bottomland" soils. These fertile soils are accumulated from erosion and weathering of soils "up slope," as well as from streams flooding and leaving rich nutrient deposits. Since much of our naturally occurring bottomland forests have been cleared for agriculture this example is not so obvious. However, historically these nutrient rich sites grew trees that were significantly taller and larger in diameter than those on dry, nutrient-poor ridge tops. If you pay close attention to soils and the forests growing on them it is evident that the relationship between soil fertility and tree growth is direct and important. The forest is truly an expression of the soil which is an expression of local geological history. In a sense the rocks speak and their words are the trees.

Joan Borzilleri photo

Commonly found along stream channels, Rhododendron (foreground) is a tree group exception because it is both evergreen and hardwood. Hemlock (background) is a classic softwood evergreen conifer.

Major tree groups

In Eastern North America there are two major groups of trees: evergreen and deciduous. Most evergreens are conifers (cone-producing), including Cedars, Junipers, Hemlocks, Pines, Spruce, and Fir. But, there are exceptions to the evergreen/conifer rule, and in fact there are hardwoods that are also evergreen, common examples in Georgia include: Southern Magnolia, Live Oak, American Holly and shrubs such as Rhododendron and Mountain Laurel.

Deciduous trees drop or lose their leaves in the fall and consist almost entirely of hardwoods. Common examples include the Oaks, Hickories, Magnolias, Maples, Dogwoods, Basswoods, American Chestnut, Chinkapins, Sourwood, Ashes, Buckeyes, Silverbells and so on. Here, too, there are exceptions, as not all deciduous trees are hardwoods. Common examples of non-hardwoods that shed their needles include Bald Cypress and Tamarack or Larch, which do not occur in north Georgia, but are worth mentioning to reinforce the concept of forest variability and natural diversity.

Throughout this series we'll also explore shade tolerance, growth rates, species competition, reproductive strategies and more. ■

Wild & Woolly

WINE TASTING & AUTHOR-FIDDLER FESTIVAL

Join us for the annual benefit
for Georgia ForestWatch:
a celebration of nature,
fine wine & food, the written word,
and Appalachian folkways.

Saturday, May 2, 10AM - 5PM

Tiger Mountain Vineyards
Tiger, Georgia

Music performed by talented fiddlers:
Marie Dunkle, Tiger, GA; Kelly Smith, Salem, SC;
John Harper Duncan, Asheville, NC

Food: Locally harvested and prepared. Coordinated by Cindy Halbkat of Sah-ka-na-ga Gardens.

Raffle art: Pat Calderone & Peter McIntosh

Books, ForestWatch merchandise, and award winning Tiger wine will also be for sale during the event. Authors will give presentations and be on hand for book signings. See schedule.

For more information visit:
www.gafw.org/events.html
Or, contact Jill:
info@gafw.org or 706-635-8733.

Wild & Woolly Event Schedule:

- **10:00 a.m. - Noon**
  Native plant sale
  Located across from winery, adjacent to parking.
- **11:00 a.m.**
  Mildred Greear - Moving Gone Dancing: A Book of Poetry that Took 87 Years to Write
- **11:45 a.m.**
  George Ella Lyon - Don't You Remember?
- **12:30 p.m.**
  Thomas Rain Crowe - The End of Eden: Writings of an Environmental Activist
- **1:00-3:00 p.m.**
  Wine tasting & hors d'oeuvres -
  Two hours of live fiddle music.
- **3:00 p.m.**
  Kathryn Kolb - Kathryn Kolb Photographs
- **3:45 p.m.**
  John Lane - The Best of the Kudzu Telegraph, and Chattooga: Descending into the Myth of Deliverance River
- **4:20 p.m.**
  Janie P. Taylor - The Storyteller - Tales of Tiger Mountain
- **4:30 p.m.**
  Raffle winners announced

District Offices of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

Ranger, Michelle Jones
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3941 Highway 76 • Chatsworth, GA 30705
mjones@fs.fed.us
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Ranger, Alan Polk
USFS Blue Ridge Ranger District
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Ranger, Dave Jensen
USFS Chattooga River Ranger
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USDA Forest Service – Region 8
1720 Peachtree St. NE
Atlanta, GA 30309
404-347-4177

Tom Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture, USDA
James L. Whitten Bldg.
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Forest Service hopes to "stimulate" Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

by Joe Gatins : Co-district leader

The national forests in Georgia appear sure to receive some of the "stimulus money" flowing to the states from Washington, but exactly how much that will sum will be, and what projects it will be used for, remained an open question as this issue went to press.

George M. Bain, supervisor of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, publicly stated on March 5 that he had submitted a wish list for "a large variety of trail and road maintenance, vegetation management, wildlife and fishery habitat restoration, recreation and facility rehabilitation" projects.

The submission, he explained, was then to be reviewed by higher-ups in the agency before an approved list is then sent back to the supervisor's office in Gainesville for implementation.

Lori Martell photo

Whether the stimulus plan proves to be beneficial or detrimental to the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests remains to be seen. ForestWatch is calling on the Forest Service to do proper environmental review on all projects resulting from stimulus funds.

Bain explained that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 signed by President Obama on February 17 contained specific criteria for implementation, largely to put people back to work in economically distressed areas. It also prohibits hiring additional Forest Service employees in favor of using "our partners and contractors to help us accomplish the work," Bain said.

Congress was quite specific in encouraging a "prioritization process" for the Forest Service that would "create the largest number of jobs in the shortest period of time." According to the stimulus bill's conference report, the agency also "should consider projects involving reconstruction, capital improvement, decommissioning, and maintenance of forest roads, bridges and trails; alternative energy technologies, and deferred maintenance at Federal facilities; and remediation of abandoned mine sites, and other related critical habitat, forest improvement and watershed enhancement projects."

Georgia ForestWatch members and its staff have monitored this process as much as possible and registered our sentiments about how these priorities are set, and which projects are being considered by the Forest Service. In particular, we have urged that such projects be subjected to proper environmental review, and that they be sustainable.

A primary concern are roads maintenance projects that might raise low level roads that should be closed or decommissioned to a higher level without the benefit of a NEPA process or environmental analysis. There is a large backlog of roads maintenance across the forest causing stream degradation. We are hopeful that the forest gets some financial assistance to address this problem but without a slower, more comprehensive analysis of road needs and identification of opportunities for closure and decommissioning of some portion of the total system then stimulus monies may be squandered and the imbalance between road usage and maintenance will not be addressed.

The agency advises that the first inkling of what "stimulus money" might come to the Chattahoochee-Oconee will likely surface on the regional forester's website in Atlanta. Visit: http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/ ■

Chattooga River Ranger District report: special use permit and prescribed burns

by Joe Gatins : Co-district leader

Re-approval of "wilderness therapy" camp permit

The U.S. Forest Service had issued a significantly amended, five-year permit to a for-profit "wilderness therapy" company for troubled youth, the Clayton-based 2nd Nature Blue Ridge LLC, to use national forestlands for its activities.

Georgia ForestWatch volunteers and district leaders on the Chattooga River Ranger District had closely monitored the company's application (originally for a 10-year permit extension), given that the first permit for the company had been issued without environmental (or public) review, and because the firm's activities in some cases had led to documented resource damage and user conflicts with other visitors to the Chattahoochee National Forest.

The district leaders met with both 2nd Nature officials and Forest Service staff to air these concerns and suggested alternatives for appropriate use of the forest in a detailed written response to the application.

We are pleased to see that Forest Supervisor George M. Bain has approved the permit renewal with a variety of provisions that both protect the public forest resource and permit the company to continue with its work with troubled and dysfunctional youth. These young people are described as aged 11-17, with "a history of emotional and behavioral problems including low self-esteem, depression, and family conflicts."

The new permit continues to prohibit use of designated Wilderness and Wilderness Study areas and the Appalachian Trail corridor (both of which were sought by 2nd Nature), as well as Wildlife Management Areas during managed hunts. It forbids campsite fire rings, tent sites and "group gathering sites" within riparian corridors (defined as 100 feet from perennial and intermittent streams and 25 feet from "ephemeral channels.")

For the first time, the permit also limits the number of troubled youth to "a maximum of 55 clients per month" and group sizes "to a maximum of 10 clients per group." Both provisions responded to specific suggestions from Georgia ForestWatch.

But the Forest Service also provided a significant expansion in the number of campsites authorized for use by 2nd Nature, from approximately 45 to around 90, and spreads these more broadly across the landscapes of the Chattooga River Ranger District (in Rabun, Habersham, Towns and White counties). The permit also requires the 2nd Nature campers to keep moving. "Campsites will only be used for a maximum of two consecutive days/nights by a group before moving," the permit said. "By spreading out the overall amount of use by Second Nature to other areas and not increasing the number of participants in their program, approval of new roads, trails and campsites will allow Second Nature to spread out their use, rotate their use among the newly approved and existing (previously approved) locations, and allow campsites to recover between uses," Supervisor Bain said in his decision of December 15. According to an agency spokesman, the fees paid the Forest Service for this permit (a percentage of the "service-day client" charges) remain the same as before.

These fees, according to 2nd Nature, routinely totaled more than six figures annually. This has led to concern that the Forest Service, with its cash-strapped budgets, would turn more and more to "rental of the forest" to for-profit enterprises to the detriment of more casual, non-paying visitors.

Indeed, 2nd Nature has expansion ideas in mind, and has filed a new permit application with the neighboring Nantahala National Forest for use of national forestlands in the Franklin, N.C., area. That application, according to Nantahala Ranger Mike Jones, will be subject to environmental review.

Prescribed burns

The district has been burning thousands of acres of national forestland in recent months under its existing program of "prescribed burns." Georgia ForestWatch has received and noted numerous complaints from citizens who do not appreciate choking on the smoke this causes or who question why the burning is necessary. Our staff and district leaders have decided to conduct a close review of the burn program in this area to better understand why it is needed and whether it is being applied from a sound scientific basis.

The agency routinely cites fuel reduction and wildlife and habitat enhancement as the reasons for many of these fires. ■

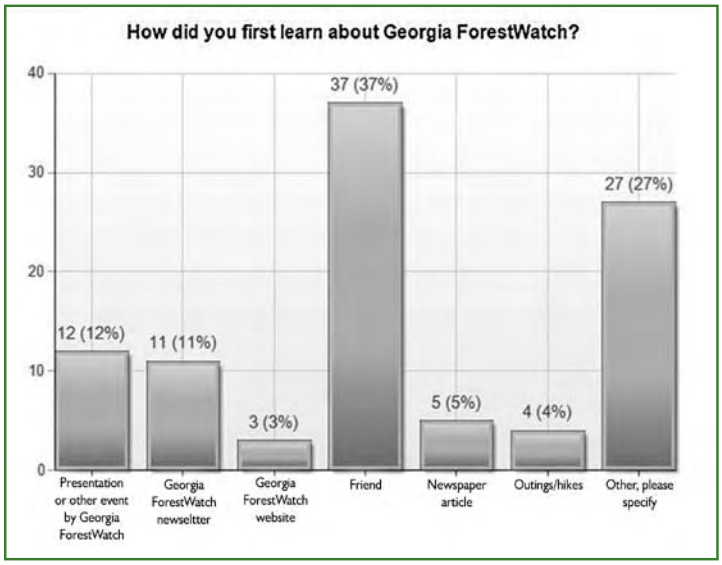
Members speak: survey results

by Joe Gatins : Co-district leader

More than 125 of you kindly answered our call last year and responded to a detailed questionnaire on what interests you about the national forests in Georgia and what motivates you to support Georgia ForestWatch.

And goodly numbers of you were not shy about suggesting improvements, which our board of directors and staff are taking to heart, such as improvements on our website and working to expand the offerings in our popular outings program.

We discovered the importance of the "word of mouth" in how members found their way into the ForestWatch community:

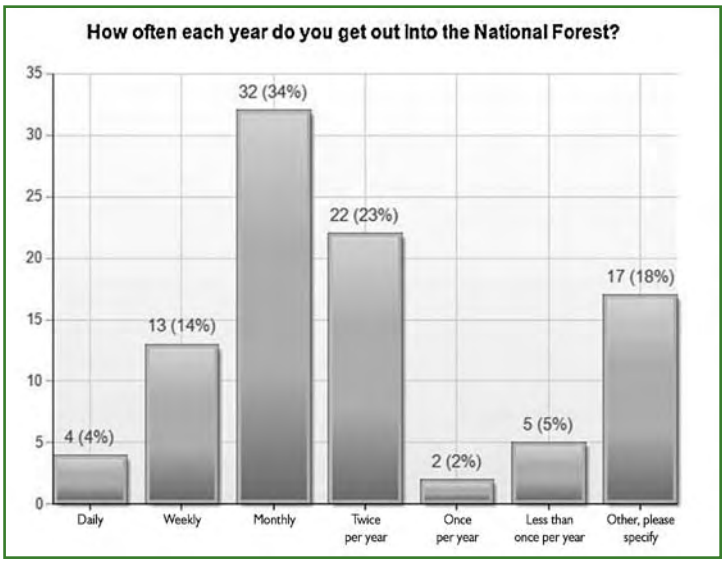


Note: Most of the "other" responses listed specific friends or revealed that first learning about ForestWatch was through other environmental organizations.

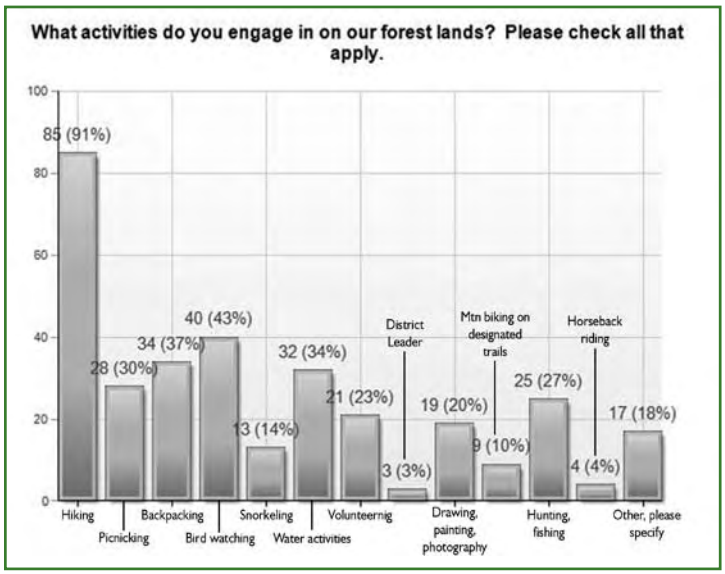
CONGRATULATIONS!

Congratulations to the winners of our survey prize drawing: Laurence Holden, Lorie Thompson, and one anonymous winner.

It also was revealing to document what activities you engage in on our forestlands and how often you visit them:



Note: "Other" responses above indicated visitation frequency between "monthly" and "twice a year."

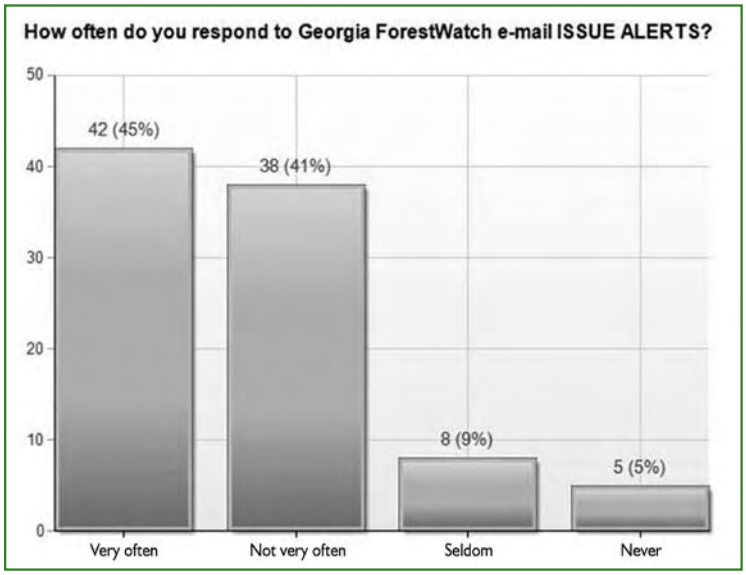


Note: "Other" responses included different studies (botanical, mycological, ecological, cultural, etc.), spending time with friends & family, and personal renewal.

You also were virtually of one voice in assigning priorities to the work of Georgia ForestWatch, in the following descending order of importance:

- Engage the U.S. Forest Service and other organizations to ensure healthy forests.
- Engage the membership and the public in influencing decision-makers to make good choices and set good policies for our forests.
- Educate the public about the amenities of our forests and how citizens can help protect the forests for us and future generations.
- Introduce citizens to and promote low-impact forest recreation.
- Encourage volunteer activities that support forest health.

We were thrilled to learn how many of you who receive our issue-related e-mail action alerts actually respond to them! You are a very active bunch:



Finally, why are you a member of Georgia ForestWatch? Again, the highest priorities reflected our mission to preserve and protect precious national forestlands, in this descending order of magnitude:

- Forest protection work by staff
- "Forestwatching" opportunities by volunteer district leaders
- Educational activities, like community programs, the newsletter and website
- Recreational activities like hike/snorkel outings (tied with next item)
- Volunteer activities such as bog restoration and invasive species removal
- Social activities and events that connect you to like-minded people

The Georgia ForestWatch staff and an expert consultant, Amy O'Connor of Integrated Development Consulting, Inc., Salt Lake City, Utah, and a subcommittee of the board have spent hours discussing and analyzing these results and working to build on the findings as part of a concerted, three-year push to increase our membership.

Look for more improvement in coming months and thank you to all who responded to our survey. ■

FORESTWATCH RETREAT

Saturday, Oct. 10, 2009

Vogel State Park (south of Blairsville, Georgia)

"Back to the Forest... Into the Future"

This year's retreat is rustic and affordable! We'll have audience-interactive discussions with national forest leaders on critical issues, followed by lunch, hikes, cookout dinner and music around the evening campfire.

Day Fee: only $20 per person
(Day fee includes 2 meals & all programing.
Does not include $3 park entrance fee at the gate.)

Lodging available for Fri & Sat nights:
Limited number of cabins & tent sites available for additional fee. Contact our office manager Jill to reserve at 706-635-8733.

Come just for the day or make a weekend of it. We're putting the word out early because of limited lodging at Vogel State Park - get it while it lasts!

Georgia ForestWatch welcomes the following new members

Pegi Amend
Robert Anderson
Sarah Bartlett and Mike Friedlander
Bonnie Birrell
Karen Boyer
Elizabeth and William Brooks
James and Susan Brooksher
Karen Burt
David Carr, Jr.
Juliet Cohen
Debbie Cosgrove
James Costa
Terry Dixon
Anne Farnsworth
Patricia Friedman
Nancy Gill
Meg Hedeen
Eleanor and Scott Johnson
Jan Kearce
Nancy Kluisza
Patricia Lee
Greg Martin
John and Marilyn McMullan
Terry and Cheryl Morris
Jan Nash
Neil Norton
Christine O' Cleary
Joyce Oliver
Jennifer Pennington
Sanjay Ranchod
Phillip Rush
Richard Simms
Betty and George Songer
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta
Lee Van Leuvan
"Sunny" Waller
John Woodard, Jr.

Chattooga boating update

Another newsletter deadline and still no news. The U.S. Forest Service apparently is reviewing proposals to permit (or not permit) boating on 21 miles of the Wild and Scenic Upper Chattooga River. Various agency spokesmen have said recently they do not know when a decision on this long-running controversy will be issued.

For updates, visit: http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/fms/

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GEORGIA FORESTWATCH

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