Forest News

Georgia ForestWatch Quarterly Newsletter Fall 2013

Locust Stake OHV Area Update

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From the Director

There's gold in them thar hills

Mary Topa
Executive Director

As a graduate student in a soil ecology laboratory, one of the first teaching moments we often had with a new class was to talk about the difference between soil and dirt. What's the difference you may ask? Well, I learned this lesson at a very early age in my grandmother's garden. She always told me you had to take care of the soil and feed it all sorts of things like composted leaves, coffee grounds, egg shells, and other good stuff – just as any organic gardener will tell you. She knew that soil was alive, teaming with life that feeds off the organic material in the soil, breaking down recognizable components like leaves, into the black gold (organic matter) she desired for her garden. Dirt, on the other hand, is displaced (as in "I have dirt on my shoes") or "dead" soil that does not contain this rich diversity of organisms.

Scientists call this living component of soil and the interaction with its environment, including plants, the soil food web. I think of it as a below-ground or hidden ecosystem that is integral to the health and well-being of the visible forested ecosystem. This soil food web facilitates nutrient cycling and the creation of rich topsoil and the distinctive soil layers, or horizons, which we see in the ground. The majority of the fine roots of trees and beneficial microorganisms associated with roots are located in the upper soil horizons, where fallen leaves, dead roots and branches, and other organic material decompose, organic matter accumulates, and nutrients are made available to plants and other soil organisms. It's recycling at its best. In addition to increasing soil fertility and helping build soil structure, organic matter accumulation acts like a sponge, absorbing and holding water in the upper soil horizons. Organic matter accumulation is critical for increasing water retention of forest soils, which helps trees tolerate dry periods between rain events.

Given all these marvelous qualities, it should be no surprise that forest health and the ability of trees to tolerate stresses such as drought, diseases and pests, are linked to healthy soils, particularly topsoil, and a healthy soil food web that develops with the aboveground vegetation. Several articles in this issue point out the impacts of recreational uses such as ATV riding (see "Locust Stake OHV Area Update" on page 15) and timber management activities (logging) on soil erosion and sedimentation of streams. Given that it takes approximately 100 years to create an inch of rich topsoil on undisturbed ground, protection of this precious resource should be at the heart of any sustainable forest management plan.

Soil erosion in an undisturbed forest is extremely low, generally under 0.5 ton/acre/year. However, major disturbances such as road building, timber harvesting and fires (both wildfires and prescribed burning, with impact dependent upon the intensity of the burn) can increase soil erosion over 100-fold (50 tons/acre/year). Ground cover by forest litter, duff and organic material is critical to protecting soil from erosion and moisture loss. Consequently, spreading slash in cut areas is important because it reduces further loss of topsoil, water and nutrients from the system. Most research suggests that harvesting only the bole will not greatly deplete soil nutrient reserves. In contrast, whole-tree harvesting removes more nutrients than can be replaced in a rotation, in addition to any loss of topsoil and the valuable organic component. This is one of many reasons biomass burning should not be considered "sustainable", and why Georgia ForestWatch joined forces with the Southern Environmental Law Center to fight against it (see "Georgia Forest Watch Involved in Major Court Victory Over Biomass" on page 8).

In any modern logging operation, skid trails and log landings generally exhibit the worst damage, with complete removal of groundcover, loss of topsoil through scraping and/or rain events, compaction of the remaining soil (subsoil in some cases), and general loss of soil organic matter. Some of these areas on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests resemble moonscapes, and the lack of success in reseeding and other planting efforts should be a clue that more intensive soil remediation is necessary (see "An update on the Brawley Mountain project" on page 10). Some may dismiss the loss of 5-7 inches of rich topsoil, but how do you replace 500-700 years of soil formation, and the vibrant soil food network? These are dead zones that will take decades if not centuries to recover the rich topsoil, soil fertility, soil structure and soil diversity that were lost. If areas are logged every 70-80 years, do forest soils ever get a chance to recover from adverse activity? Shouldn't soil protection/restoration be an integral part of any forest management plan? These are questions I keep asking myself, and ones that I have started asking the Forest Service.

Additionally, the upper layers of soil represent one of the largest carbon sinks on the planet. They play a major role in the global carbon cycle, and any climate change strategy for our national forests should include maximizing carbon sequestration in forest soils and soil protection. If forest health and restoration are the focus of the 2004 Land and Resource Management Plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, then the Forest Service and other forest managers should start viewing forest soil as black gold and manage for conservation of this precious resource.

Mary A. Topa

Georgia ForestWatch Fall Retreat set for October 5

Join us for Georgia ForestWatch's annual Fall Retreat and membership meeting on Saturday, October 5, at Vogel State Park, one of Georgia's oldest parks with stunning mountain views of Blood and Slaughter Mountain. For those of you who have attended our Fall Retreat in the past, you know to expect a wonderful weekend of hikes, community building, informative presentations and discussions, and socializing with old friends and new.

Saturday activities begin at 10:00AM with a celebration of our successes over the past year. Morning presentations will focus on our future, with a discussion of Georgia ForestWatch initiatives and goals for 2014, highlighting our new Invasives Initiative. Mark Dalusky of the University of Georgia will update us on the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid Biocontrol project, and Sarah Francisco of the Southern Environmental Law Center will speak to our efforts at the Locust Stake ATV Trail System. Carlos Martel will give us a CoTrails update.

Our chili contest is back by popular demand and will be the main course for lunch on Saturday. After lunch, you can relax on the banks of Vogel's Lake Trahlyta with friends, or participate in some of our outdoor activities: hikes led by Tom Govus on Coosa Bald and Mark Warren (Through the Eyes of the Cherokee); see photos of Ted Doll's recent Africa trip; paddle boating; and tree climbing with Genevieve Summers and Jim Walker.

Once again, David Govus will be preparing a delicious BBQ dinner with musical accompaniment by Marie Dunkle and Brian Wills. Dinner will be followed by campfire music, an Owl Prowl with Janet Westervelt, and storytelling.

Come just for the day, or stay over Friday and/or Saturday night. For those who are coming for the weekend, Friday night you can catch up with old friends and meet new ones at our potluck dinner, and listen to music by Brian Wills. On Sunday, early risers can go on a sunrise silent meditation walk around Lake Trahlyta with Tom Colkett, catch some breakfast, and explore on your own or go on a hike with Ben Cash.

Cost: $30/person, $45/couple; $15 for students, but kids 12 and under are FREE. Includes all programming, light breakfasts, drinks, chili lunch, BBQ dinner and vegetarian entrees.

Space is limited so be sure to call our office at 706-635-8733 and register for this wonderful event, or email us at info@gafw.org. Limited cabins and campsites are available through Georgia ForestWatch.

We can't wait to see you there! ■

At the annual meeting, members can elect up to two At-Large-Directors to the Board of Directors. Any member in good standing can serve as an At-Large-Director. We are currently accepting nominations. If you would like to nominate a candidate or be considered yourself, please contact Mary Topa no later than October 4, 2013.

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Georgia ForestWatch is a 501(c)3
Nonprofit educational corporation.

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Cover photo credit: Darren Wolfgang

Camp Merrill decision – a slippery slope

by Marie Dunkle : District Leader

Camp Frank D. Merrill (Camp Merrill) sits in the middle of the Chattahoochee National Forest, on top of the Etowah River headwaters and a dozen miles from Dahlonega, GA. For 60 years, the 282 acres of National Forest that encompass this Army Ranger training camp have been governed under a special use permit granted by the USDA Forest Service to the Department of Defense (DOD). Next year these lands may be permanently transferred to the DOD if Georgia's 9th District Congressman, Doug Collins, gets his way. Georgia ForestWatch wants to stop this from happening and here's why.

The facts:
Camp Merrill has operated efficiently for the last 60 years under a lease agreement and Memorandum of Understanding between the DOD and Forest Service. The administrative cost to the U.S. Army for Forest Service administration of this permit is approximately $55,000 per year.

National Forest land transfers with the DOD have long been regulated by the Interchange with the Department of Defense Act of 1956, which assures that the public's interests and access are protected, the exchange of land is mutually beneficial, and the process is transparent. Thus, this law ensures public access, provides for compensation for lost forest resources, and allows citizens to have a voice in the process.

This summer, U.S. Representative Collins introduced a last minute amendment (#291) to the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act that would transfer 282 acres of the Chattahoochee National Forest land, the site of Camp Merrill, from the Forest Service to the DOD. The amended act passed the House of Representatives on June 14, 2013, and the bill has been placed on the calendar in the U.S. Senate.

Rep. Collins alleged in a press release that the Forest Service administrative burden has cost the Army three million dollars

Photo credit: US Army

Army rangers training at Camp Merrill.

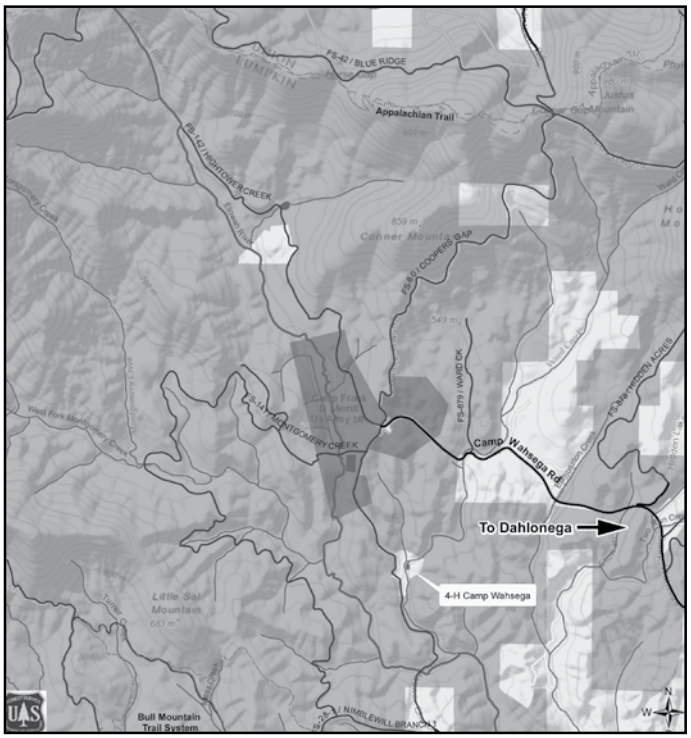

Photo credit: US Forest Service

Camp Frank D. Merrill land area – 282 acres

in delayed construction and maintenance costs. When Georgia ForestWatch asked for specifics on these claims, Rep. Collins declined to provide any information that would support these questionable claims.

In July, Georgia ForestWatch issued an Action Alert on the matter. The Alert encouraged our members and others to contact U.S. Senators Saxby Chambliss and Johnny Isakson to ask them to lead an effort to drop this harmful amendment from the final bill. Their responses to our members' letters and emails indicate that both senators intend to support Rep. Collins' Amendment 291.

The harm:
Should the long-held process for land transfers with DOD be bypassed, there is no assurance that the public interest and access to National Forest lands will continue to be protected. Defying existing law, Collins' amendment calls for unilateral transfer of land without review and opportunity for public input. If enacted, this will set a dangerous precedent that could result in loss of public land and access not only in Georgia, but nationwide.

In addition to the harm when citizens lose their voice in the public process, there is potential for environmental damage in Collins' amendment. If the land transfer to DOD does occur, and should the Army later determine the land is no longer needed, there is the

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Success grows steadily

by Peg Griffith : Board Advisor

Like the forest, the work of Georgia ForestWatch is a slow but steady process. It generally takes years to bring about long-lasting change. Nevertheless, Georgia ForestWatch continues in earnest our efforts to protect the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest – not just the trees, but the soil, the water, and the entire forested ecosystems these lands contain. Georgia ForestWatch staff, volunteers, board, and our attorneys are willing to fight when necessary, and compromise when we can to preserve, protect, and restore the forests you own. It is important to remain optimistic and remind ourselves every now and then of our achievements. Here's a recap of some of our successes of yesterday and today.

Halting clear-cutting

Clear-cutting on the Chattahoochee National Forest increased from 13,000 acres in the 1960s to 36,500 acres in the 1980s. Georgia ForestWatch volunteers struggled and worked hard and smart through the 1980s and early 1990s to halt these damaging timber sales. Their efforts were finally rewarded by a federal court decision in the 1996 case, Sierra *vs.* Martin. A panel of federal judges ruled that the Forest Service had failed in its duty to monitor the effects of the timber removal program, bringing to a halt this controversial logging practice. It was Georgia ForestWatch's first big win!

Photo credit: Larry Winslett

Georgia ForestWatch was "born" out of growing citizen concern to bring an end to clear-cutting and the realization that an organized group was needed to watchdog Forest Service management activities.

Photo credit: GFW archives

A young Jim Sullivan looks over a forest stand that had been clear-cut and burned by the Forest Service between 1987-1988.

Identifying and preserving old-growth

In 1991, the acting supervisor of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest declared that only four acres of old-growth trees remained in the forest. Active ForestWatchers at that time knew better. Georgia ForestWatch hired expert woodsman Jess Riddle to lead the search and answer the question, "How much old growth is left?" Over a four-year period, Jess and volunteer Georgia ForestWatch assistants located over 11,000 acres of old growth forests! We continue to push for the protection of these ancient natural forests.

Closing the Rich Mountain Road

In 1973, the Forest Service made their last major land acquisition for the Chattahoochee National Forest by purchasing 13,000 acres in the Rich Mountains from northern timber companies for $70 per acre. Included in the purchase was a very steep and deteriorating 10-mile 'road' that climbed to the crest of the mountains, ascending and descending 2,000 feet over its length. The Forest Service refused to acknowledge ownership of the road alleging that the road belonged to Gilmer County though no easements had been granted, and the county had made no claims on the road. With no maintenance and steep grades, the road deteriorated into a mudbogging course drawing off road vehicles from hundreds of miles away. ATV trails emanated off the 'road' into the nearby Rich Mountain Wilderness. Georgia Forest Watch sued the Forest Service in 2004 over the management of the 'road'. A settlement agreement resulted in the western third of the road being obliterated and the rest rebuilt and gated during the winter. ATVs were banned and illegal off-road activity ceased.

Restricting off-road vehicle damage

On May 23, 2008, the U.S. Forest Service announced that after five years of analysis the agency had decided to permanently close

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Welcome Sherri Richardson and Daniel Force

Mary Topa and the Georgia ForestWatch Board of Directors welcome two new staff members to the ForestWatch family.

Sherri Richardson

Sherri Richardson started on June 18th as our new part-time Office Manager. Sherri definitely hit the ground running, and was not deterred by her first week. She had to quickly come up to speed with our membership database software, and learn how to get mailings done for both our summer newsletter and a summer appeal letter! Not to mention figuring out how to work with our very temperamental color printer that did not want to print out 600 letters. Sherri's background in bookkeeping and employment with H&R Block has helped her master everything that we throw at her. She is rolling up her sleeves to help organize the Fall Retreat and looks forward to meeting you all.

Sherri and her family are local business owners in Ellijay – she's been their bookkeeper and takes care of all things financial for the family business. No stranger to giving back to the community, Sherri is a volunteer firefighter for Gilmer County. Please stop in and say "hello" to Sherri when you are in Ellijay, or visit with her at our Fall Retreat.

Daniel Force has joined Georgia ForestWatch as our new Outreach and Development Coordinator. His first day was on August 12th, and like Sherri, he has hit the ground running and is eager to meet our members and partners. Daniel will work out of his home in Atlanta, and travel to the Ellijay office several times a month. For the past few years, Georgia ForestWatch leadership has talked about increasing our visibility in the metro-Atlanta region. Upon making the decision to hire an Outreach and Development Coordinator, we thought that having someone in Atlanta will help foster better relationships with our (current and new) conservation and foundation partners in the metro-Atlanta region, and ultimately increase our visibility there.

Daniel Force

Daniel will help coordinate outreach efforts and services for Georgia ForestWatch members and the public, particularly in the metro-Atlanta area. He will also work to increase membership, and with ForestWatch leadership, help facilitate face-to-face relationships with, as well as developing our major donor program. And of course, he will play a major role organizing ForestWatch annual events.

Daniel is excited to start expanding the Georgia ForestWatch community, particularly in the metro-Atlanta region. Prior to coming to Georgia, Daniel earned his B.S. in Environmental Studies from Oregon State University. He has a diverse community-organizing background working with environmental groups such as the Sierra Student Coalition, Cascade Climate Network, Energy Action Coalition and the Nature Conservancy. His most valued experiences as an organizer came through his leadership of the Oregon State University Student Sustainability Initiative, recognized nationally as one of the most successful student organizations of its kind. He is an avid backpacker and can't wait to see you on the trails! ■

Camp Merrill decision

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possibility of sale to private developers. This could present a scenario in which the public is not compensated for loss of forest resources and public access, and oversight of development would fall to local permitting authorities, who can (and do) issue harmful variances to environmental regulations.

Where Georgia ForestWatch stands:

Georgia ForestWatch supports the current long-standing arrangement between the Forest Service and DOD for operation of Camp Merrill. In fact, Georgia ForestWatch recently voiced support for the Army's proposed sewage treatment facility upgrades at Camp Merrill to ensure that the Etowah River is not polluted. Georgia ForestWatch will continue to support environmentally-sound actions, while speaking out loudly against seizure of public forest lands, as well as against Congressional actions that skirt public process and are deaf to the voice of its citizens. ■

Welcome New Members!

Blue Ridge Mountain Outfitters
Linda Fraser
Denice Lee
Larry Loots & Debra Harmon
Jean Millkey
Lamar Mullis
Plum Tree Yoga
Sandy Thomas

Blue Ridge District pine thinning revisited

by David Govus : District Leader and Board Member

In July of 2012, the Blue Ridge Ranger District of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (CONF) proposed thinning 7,000 acres of 'overstocked' pines to prevent disease. These 7,000 acres comprised some 120 stands. Stands typically are 20 – 80 acre sections of the forest that have a similar forest type. The entire CONF is mapped and divided into thousands of these stands. Georgia ForestWatch was skeptical of this proposal because many of the stands proposed for thinning are located in the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area and in the headwaters of the Etowah River. To reach some of the stands, the proposal also included rebuilding bridges over Noontootla Creek that formerly were used to access clear-cutting areas. All of these areas are well known to Georgia ForestWatch, and it was difficult to envision most of them having thick stands of pines.

So, Georgia ForestWatch surveyed 20 randomly-selected stands over several days in August and found that only one stand had overstocked pines. Many of the stands had no pines at all. While discussing our survey at a meeting on site, the Forest Service acknowledged that most of the stands did not need thinning, and the proposal was shelved.

This summer the Blue Ridge District reintroduced the pine thinning proposal in a much more modest and acceptable form. The project acreage was reduced from 7,000 acres to 700 acres, and the stands from 120 to 20. Several Georgia ForestWatch members field-checked the new proposal, and of the 15 stands examined, 12 did in fact contain overstocked pine. Although the reason for including any inappropriate stands in this second proposal is unclear, the quick turnover of foresters on the district may have something to do with it. The forester who first proposed the thinning left shortly after our on-site discussion, and the current forester is now leaving after less than a year on the district.

Photo credit: David Govus

Example of stand erroneously designated as overstocked pine for thinning.

Fortunately, Georgia ForestWatch has a deep institutional knowledge of the forest and is staying engaged. It should be noted that most of the stands currently identified for thinning are old Forest Service clear-cuts that would be mature diverse forest by now if not for earlier 'treatment'. ■

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Georgia ForestWatch involved in major court victory over biomass burning

by David Govus : Board Member and District Leader

A key federal court ruling on July 12, 2013, confirmed that the Clean Air Act limits on carbon dioxide pollution apply to industrial facilities, including tree-burning power plants that burn biomass. The ruling upholds the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) authority to regulate pollution that drives climate change. Georgia ForestWatch played an important role in this major legal victory that will protect the forests that we love, help reduce respiratory ailments and control carbon dioxide emissions!

This ruling is in response to a lawsuit filed in August 2011 by Georgia ForestWatch, Wild Virginia, The Center for Biological Diversity, Conservation Law Foundation and the Natural Resources Council for Maine. The lawsuit asked the federal Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit to overturn the carbon dioxide exemption for wood-fired power plants and other "biomass" incinerators. Although the EPA announced in June 2010 that they would begin to regulate carbon dioxide emissions as pollutants, after aggressive lobbying by the Forest Products and Bioenergy Industry, the EPA changed course and exempted wood and biomass burning facilities from carbon dioxide emissions for a period of three years. This change not only freed these plants from carbon dioxide regulations, but also exempted these plants from the requirement that they use 'best available' technology in constructing or revamping their plants to burn biomass. This was particularly unfortunate as it allowed plants to be built not only without consideration of carbon dioxide emissions but without the latest technology to control sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxide and other pollutants.

This free pass for the Bioenergy Industry could have a huge impact on the vast acreages of public and private forest land located in the Southeast, where it could create increasing pressure to cut native, standing forests for fuel. The EPA ruling touched off a rush to build or convert facilities to burn biomass that were unfortunately eligible for misguided subsidies. At the time, Kevin Bundy, senior attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity said, "The science is clear: Burning our forests for energy makes no sense as a strategy for dealing with climate change. Widespread biomass development, which the EPA's illegal exemption aims to facilitate, will undermine our ability to meet critical near-term greenhouse gas reduction goals and further degrade our nation's forest ecosystems."

Photo credit: Larry Winslett

The increasing demand for wood pellets will increase pressure to cut standing forests for fuel.

Several Georgia ForestWatch members gave sworn declarations concerning the effects of global warming on our forests. One

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Success grows steadily

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the Anderson Creek Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) Area. This decision culminated a decade-long campaign by Georgia ForestWatch to end the damage that off-road vehicles were causing in this sensitive area. Georgia ForestWatch volunteers and staff spent countless hours hiking the eroding OHV-created trails (gullies), and documenting the degradation of this portion of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest.

Reducing and modifying ill-advised Forest Service "Projects"

In December of 2005, the Forest Service announced a plan to heavily harvest timber across 725 acres of mature forest on Brawley Mountain. Once the trees had been cut and harvested, the Forest Service proposed to burn the area repeatedly and kill re-sprouting hardwoods with herbicides. Timber harvesting for this ill-advised project was finally reduced from 725 to approximately 300 acres, sparing much of the mature oak forest that Georgia ForestWatch identified. In addition, the Forest Service agreed to no longer label the project as "woodland restoration", and improved the monitoring schedule needed to determine the success or failure of this experimental forest management. Georgia ForestWatch responds to, and asks for modification of countless Forest Service projects. (Note: see an update on our continuing work on the Brawley Mountain project elsewhere in this issue.)

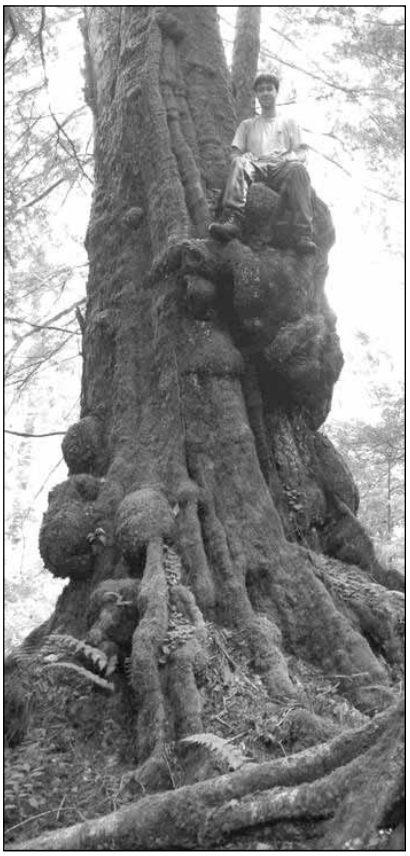


Photo credit: GFW archives

Jess Riddle taking a break on an old friend.

Continuing the Upper Chattooga River protection battle

Seven years ago, several boating groups sued the Forest Service, seeking unrestricted boating on the entire Upper Chattooga River, without flow or season limits. Georgia ForestWatch rejected their arguments, asserting that the last and only few miles of Wild and Scenic River in Georgia should be preserved. On March 30, 2013, the U.S. District Court in the District of South Carolina rejected the boaters' arguments and supported the Forest Service's ability to manage recreational activities in the Wild and Scenic Chattooga River Corridor. We await news regarding impact of this decision on our separate case challenging management of the Upper Chattooga more generally.

Photo credit: David Govus

Illegal trail off Anderson Creek ORV area.

These cases illustrate that our work is effective and broad-reaching. But this work takes the time and efforts of many people, and the process is slow. In a fast-paced world, it is easy to forget the issues and our successes. So keep the faith: Georgia ForestWatch is working for you to Preserve, Protect, and Restore the National Forests in Georgia.

Victory over biomass burning

(continued from page 8)

declaration pointed out that in the last 40 years the section of the Conasauga River that held trout had diminished by three miles due to drought and warming. This was a necessary step to establish 'standing' on the part of Georgia ForestWatch to challenge the EPA action.

This past week the conservative DC Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the environment and common sense, and struck down the EPA exemption. In their ruling, the court noted that "the atmosphere can't tell the difference between fossil fuel carbon dioxide and carbon dioxide emitted by burning trees". In fact biomass plants produce more carbon dioxide per kilowatt hour of energy produced than fossil fuel plants, and nearly all existing biomass plants are out of compliance with existing air quality regulations. This does not even take into consideration the energy expended to cut, chop and transport biomass, and the damage that clear-cutting has on soil, water, forests and wildlife.

We thank our long-time legal partners, Southern Environmental Law Center, and Attorney Frank Rambo (head of their Clean Energy and Air Program) for their excellent work! ■

An update on the Brawley Mountain project

by Jim Walker : District Leader

In the initial scoping notice for the Brawley Mountain Project, dated December 15, 2005, the Forest Service proposed to remove most of the timber on 735 acres. Thanks to the efforts of Georgia ForestWatch and the Southern Environmental Law Center, the area to be cut was reduced to 395 acres, sparing some of the finest mature hardwood forest anywhere in the vicinity, with trees up to 120 years old and 30 inches in diameter. Implementation of the project, which was designed to create golden-winged warbler habitat through woodland restoration, began in 2011. Georgia ForestWatch continues to monitor it, and the following is a report on our latest visit to the site.

Transforming a forest into woodland is not easy, especially on a rich site such as Brawley Mountain. Doing so would require enormous resources, effort, and a long, long time. So far there are no examples of successful forest to woodland restoration in the Southern Appalachians.

There are many definitions of "woodland." In their restoration effort, the Forest Service has proposed a woodland like that defined by NatureServe: "Open stands of trees at least 6 meters (almost 20 feet) tall, with crowns often not interlocking; tree canopy discontinuous (often clumped), averaging between 66 and 40% overall cover; shrub layer often poorly developed or present only in gaps in the canopy," adding that "…an additional characteristic often used is a ground cover of mainly herbaceous species with grasses having more cover than broad-leafed herbs." Yet the Environmental Assessment of the project, dated August 1, 2008, called for 80% canopy removal on upper slopes and 70–40% removal on mid slopes, indicating that the proposed woodland was not consistent with NatureServe's definition.
Progress on the project has been slow. Of the three ridges involved in the project, the west ridge was cut in 2011, the middle ridge in 2012, and timber harvest on the east ridge is planned to begin in the fall of 2013. The logging operation on the two cut ridges was carried out reasonably well, leaving well-spaced mature trees (not clumps), mostly oaks. On the west ridge, slash was spread over the skid trails and landings. But this has not been done on the middle ridge, leaving tall piles of slash lining the bare skid trails. Spreading slash on the skid trails reduces erosion and along with berms, deters ATV intrusion (none was seen on our recent visit).

While tree cutting on the project has been well conducted, treatment of the remaining stumps has been poorly executed. Many tree species sprout prolifically from stumps. And now the west and middle ridges are covered with stump sprouts, primarily red maple, among the mature trees that were left standing. Having had one more year to grow, the stump sprouts on the west ridge are considerably larger than those on the middle ridge. The growth has continued despite the fact that unlike stumps on the middle ridge, they were treated with herbicide.

The most efficient and effective way to prevent stump sprouts is "cut surface application," which consists of spraying or painting the top of the stump with herbicide immediately after the tree has been cut. The herbicide must be applied within one hour after the tree has been cut or it has practically no effect at all. Unfortunately, cut surface application was deemed to be too expensive for use in the Brawley Mountain Project, and foliar spray was used instead. Foliar spraying requires a larger amount of herbicide than cut surface application, is less effective and causes greater collateral damage to non-target vegetation and the overall environment. It has had very little impact on stump sprouts on the west ridge. The middle ridge was supposed to be treated with herbicide in July or August 2013, but that has now been pushed back to mid-September, while a contract is being negotiated. If used in late September, foliar application would be less effective (if effective at all) as leaves begin to dry up and fall.

Photo credit: David Govus

Failed attempt to plant rye grass on West Ridge of Brawley Mountain.

The Forest Service originally planned to precede herbicide treatment with prescribed burning. ("Areas are not prescribed burned for at least 30 days after the herbicide treatment," according to the Environmental Assessment.) The west, middle, and east ridges would be burned in succession, one each year, on a 3- to 5-year cycle continuing indefinitely. However, prescribed burning is behind schedule. In 2012, the slash spread on the west ridge had not seasoned enough for a prescribed burn. The Forest Service planned to burn the west ridge in 2013 but did not do so, even though thousands of acres were burned elsewhere on the Blue Ridge District. So the stump sprouts will have another year to grow without the detriment of fire.

The west ridge currently is scheduled to be burned in the winter of 2014. Depending on the results of the burn, another herbicide treatment may be applied to the stump sprouts, which now resemble very large, dense bushes. Many years of observation by Georgia ForestWatch indicate that fire top-kills maple (and other tree species) but does not significantly harm the roots, which continue to sprout after being burned as many as ten times. Whether a combination of fire and herbicide can do the job is yet to be seen.

Perhaps the most distressing feature of the project so far is the loss of topsoil. A pretty good oak tree can grow in 100 years or so, if it has good soil. But it can take several centuries to create a few inches of topsoil , and only if the soil and its litter layer remain undisturbed.

Even by contemporary standards (use of large heavy equipment), the skid trails seem excessively wide (up to 40 feet or more). Where there was once a thick layer of rich topsoil, there is now only hard red clay that is unlikely to grow not only hardwood trees but even a decent stand of grass in the foreseeable future. In spite of some efforts to prevent it, erosion has multiplied the loss of topsoil and continues to do so. Rye grass planted on skid trails and landings after logging the west ridge came up well last year, but not at all this year.

Although it's too soon to declare this attempt at woodland restoration a failure, other than the timber harvest, things do not appear to be going well toward accomplishing the stated objective of the Brawley Mountain Golden-winged Warbler and Woodland Restoration Project (full name). According to the project's original scoping notice, its purpose is "to create and maintain suitable golden-winged warbler habitat … through restoration of open woodland conditions." The measures of success will be "a more widespread distribution of golden-winged warblers and associated species or increased populations." The decision notice (July 17, 2009) says that implementation of the selected alternative "…is expected to result in a three-fold increase in the population of golden-winged warbler."

Photo credit: David Govus

Stump sprouts on Brawley Mountain.

Whether forest management treatments at Brawley have been successful in increasing populations of golden-winged warblers (GWWA) remain to be seen.

In an article published in the Georgia Ornithological Society journal, The Oriole, Nathan Klaus reported, "2002 at least three territories, three males, one female, five fledglings, plus two adult hybrids were seen, burned spring 2003; 12 singing males in 2003."

Jim Wentworth, the Forest Service author of the project, has written two reports of pre-treatment observations. On August 8, 2008, he stated, "As many as 8–10 signing (sic) males have been detected at any given time along the Brawley Mountain Road, and the 12–15 pairs is an estimate of the total population, knowing that we can't sample all of the habitat."

In May of 2012, Wentworth wrote, "Pre-treatment bird survey data was collected in 2004-2007 in order to establish baseline conditions and surveys. The number of GWWA detected along these transects were two in 2004, one in 2005, zero in 2006, and three in 2007. All GWWA were found at the very upper ends of the transects near the Brawley Mountain Road. Surveys will be conducted annually for at least five years post-treatment. Although the formal monitoring along transects has not been done since 2008, the GWWA populations along the Brawley Mountain road were surveyed by Georgia Ornithological Society and Atlanta Audubon members as well as by local birders. We received reports from five birders representing five separate trips to Brawley Mountain during May 2008. As many as eight singing male golden-winged warblers were detected during these surveys. This is consistent with reports from previous years received both from birders and from Georgia DNR and US Forest Service personnel."

Georgia ForestWatch staff and volunteers have also seen and heard GWWA over the years since we have been dealing with this project. Up until 2012, I had heard but not seen them. But in 2012, I saw two and heard and/or saw five individuals. On a visit to Brawley Mountain this year, despite our best efforts, Georgia ForestWatch District Leader David Govus and I failed to see or hear any GWWA. In separate surveys by groups of experienced birders on May 5 and 6 of this year, each saw or heard one individual.

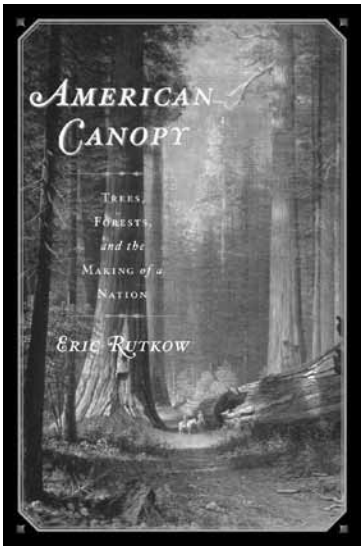
While Georgia ForestWatch has consistently opposed "woodland restoration" on inappropriate sites, we have always supported efforts to expand the GWWA population. However, since the original scoping, we have consistently urged that such efforts be made on a modest scale until they have been shown to work. ■

Book Review:
American Canopy: Trees, Forests and the Making of a Nation

by Dietrich Hoecht : Hike Leader

American Canopy: Trees, Forests and the Making of a Nation, by Eric Rutkow
Scribner, a Division of Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York. 2012.

This book is an intriguing account of American history that connects trees and forests to the growth of our nation – a connection we all are aware of, but to a limited degree. Here, historian Eric Rutkow gives an in-depth view of this important relationship, and does so in a very readable and entertaining way. With special insight, he leads us through the times of forest exploration and vast economic growth related to forest resources. His accounts of various impacting events across this continent from the early colonial period to the present are of special interest to the reader, as is his discussion of today's important challenges related to trees.



Among the more intriguing of Rutkow's accounts is a story of shipbuilding in England during the early colonial period. The English Royal Navy had no domestic supplies for tall masts to outfit their expanding, world-dominating fleet. They imported fir trees from the Baltic and white pine was brought in from New England. Colonists also exported trees to other countries. So, by 1691 to ensure a plentiful supply for the Royal Navy, King William III's revised Massachusetts Bay Charter mandated that pines of 24-inch diameter and greater be marked with "The King's Broad Arrow" – a series of three hatchet slashes spread to resemble an arrowhead and signifying property of the crown. Felling such huge valuable trees without damage and transporting them overland, towed by big teams and oxcarts with 15-foot diameter wheels, were indeed troublesome endeavors.

It is hard to imagine the toll that railroad construction in the mid 1800s took on the forests of the United States eastern territories. Initially, even the rails were made out of squared oak and topped with strips of steel, as steel was expensive to produce. Oak cross-ties lasted only five to 10 years as a result of ground contact rot. The opening up of lands to the west beyond the Appalachian Mountains required timber for rail ties, trestles, rail cars, telegraph poles, and housing. Industrial needs for charcoal, tanning bark, building supplies for commerce and habitation for new immigrants, and agricultural fencing also fueled forest exploitation.

Rutkow introduces late 1800s/early 1900s pioneers of both forest exploitation and forest protection. The many preservationists highlighted include not only well known ones like Johnny Appleseed, John Muir and Henry David Thoreau, but also Gifford Pinchot, a forester who became the first chief of the US Forest Service. Sawmill owner Friedrich Weyerheuser, after acquiring several small operations, started the nation's largest wood products company in 1900. Henry Flagler opened up Florida's East Coast by building rail lines for tourism and then for large scale orange growing. Until around 1879 when the railroad ended on the Florida Keys, the towns of Jacksonville, St. Augustine and Miami were mere outposts among the swamps and longleaf pine forests that covered the entire state.

Did you know that during WWI our government owned huge precision mills for structural spruce lumber? The wood was shipped to European allies, exclusively to supply their aircraft industries, and production peaked at 22 million board feet per month. In France, general wartime needs for wood were still met by native growth, but an American Expeditionary Force of 20,000 was sent there to supply the manpower for harvesting.

Have you heard of President Roosevelt's Shelterbelt? He fought for a tree planting scheme on the Great Plains to curtail soil erosion in the dust bowl. By 1938, 34.5 million trees had been planted. Even today the earlier planting of 18,600 linear miles of tree strips has a lasting effect.

Rutkow also delves into postwar periods and the changing attitudes of those entrusted with managing our forests. He describes new activism by organizations like the Wilderness Society and a new appreciation for forests with recreational focus. He presents a greater understanding of the environmental impacts of rain forests and highlights the effects of carbon release and capture by global forest cover.

History would be better taught by telling stories like those detailed in this book rather than exposing our young ones to the 'dry old stuff' found in textbooks. Tying history to the natural environment makes one appreciate both of them more profoundly. *American Canopy* is fascinating reading. ■

CoTrails: Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests' 2014 Trail Plan

by Audrey Moylan : Board Advisor

The evaluation and prioritizing phase of the CoTrails Issues and Opportunities (I&O) process for this year is nearly complete. When finished, each Ranger District on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests will have a Trail Plan that identifies projects on its 2014 schedule. As noted in the summer 2013 Forest News, proposals for new trails or for changing the managed use of a designated trail (opportunities) and those for reroutes or decommissioning of either designated or social trails (issues) were first submitted to the districts, where evaluation and prioritizing began. Following input from CoTrails volunteers and interested public and internal analysis, each district identified those I&Os and proposed maintenance projects to put forward in a 2014 Trail Plan Proposition. These drafts were presented to CoTrails leadership (Forest Service and volunteer) for review, and the recommended projects in each district were then presented to the wider CoTrails group and public at a general meeting on August 27. Recommended proposals approved at this meeting were then submitted by the districts to the Forest Supervisor's Office (SO) for evaluation and prioritizing by the Forest Leadership Team. The Forest Leadership Team then made the final decision on which projects could go forward in FY 2014. This 2014 Trail Plan will be announced at a CoTrails general meeting on September 17, about the time when this newsletter has gone to press.

Upcoming CoTrails Events:

(see CoTrails.org for details)

October 12
First Aid Certification Class
Chattooga River Ranger District HQ
Conasauga Ranger District Volunteer Appreciation Picnic

October 19
Crew Leader Training Class
Chattooga River Ranger District HQ

October 28
CoTrails 2nd Annual Volunteer Appreciation & Awards Picnic

November 9
Crosscut Saw Certification Class
Blue Ridge Ranger District HQ

Georgia ForestWatch has been engaged in all of the CoTrails activities that culminated in the Forest Service's 2014 Trail Plan, from the inception of this widely-acclaimed collaborative initiative to development of the recommended district-level plans. Former Georgia ForestWatch Executive Director Wayne Jenkins, then Forest Supervisor George Bain, and representatives from the major trail user groups visualized the CoTrails initiative and set forth a Strategic Plan to guide the process. The CoTrails' mission is to provide a diverse, quality trail experience that is maintainable and ecologically sustainable. The first step toward achieving that mission was to identify and professionally evaluate the least sustainable among the Forests' 850 miles of trails. Georgia ForestWatch secured a grant from the R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation to partially fund the assessment phases of these 200 miles of trails.

Applying trail-assessment knowledge gained in the field from both the professionals and Forest Service personnel, volunteers from all user groups then evaluated an additional 250 marginally sustainable trail miles. ForestWatchers participated notably in trail assessments on the Chattooga River Ranger District (CRRD), with District Leader Ben Cash taking part in all 32 assessments on the CRRD. Three other ForestWatchers participated in the CRRD assessments, which have received plaudits from CoTrails leadership. Data and recommendations from the professional and volunteer assessments were the basis of most proposed maintenance, decommission, and reroute projects in the districts' 2014 Trail Plan Propositions.

The role of Georgia ForestWatch in the evaluation and priorities phase of the I&O process is to identify ecological sustainability issues in new trail, managed-use change, and reroute proposals. Most of ForestWatch's effort in this phase focused on proposals submitted to the Conasauga Ranger District (CRD), which included six new trails for bike and/or horse riding, and two designated use changes. District Leaders David Govus and Jim Walker, along with Executive Director Mary Topa, reviewed the new trail proposals, prepared comprehensive written comments and presented them at open meetings held at the CRD headquarters.

Three of the proposed new trails are in the Mountaintown Inventoried Roadless Area. ForestWatch has significant concerns about the sustainability of these three trails and environmental degradation that would undoubtedly occur in these sensitive areas from horse/biking uses. This sort of high impact use, combined with the prevailing abundant rainfall in the area, and soft, loamy soils, would accelerate soil loss and sedimentation of nearby streams. The loamy soils are easily compacted and eroded, and maintainability of

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Board of Directors revisits strategic plan

by Kasey Sturm : President, Board of Directors

Strategic planning is often described as a living, breathing process by which an organization seeks to define its strategy or direction, and makes decisions on how to allocate its resources in pursuit of this strategy. It requires an organization to continually reassess itself. Integral to the strategic planning process is an understanding and assessment of the organization's vision, mission, values, goals and strategy. Depending upon the type of strategic planning process undertaken, the process may focus on all of these concepts, a specific subset of these concepts or just one targeted concept. The strategic planning process may be broad based or specifically targeted.

In 2010, Georgia ForestWatch (with the help of a generous grant from The Sapelo Foundation) held a weekend-long strategic planning retreat to conduct a broad-based review and revision of its vision and mission statements, its goals and an outdated strategic plan. The retreat resulted in the adoption of a revised strategic plan by the Board of Directors on April 5, 2010, including revised vision and mission statements and revised strategies and goals. The 2010 strategic plan was adopted as a two-year plan and outlined an ambitious set of goals for the organization. While some of the goals and strategies from the 2010 plan remain relevant today, much has changed since our review in 2010, including extensive organizational changes at Georgia ForestWatch, as well as changes to some of the issues facing our national forests and Georgia ForestWatch.

On July 13, 2013, Georgia ForestWatch (again with the generous support of The Sapelo Foundation) sat down to take another look at its strategic plan and the issues facing the organization. Julie Stuart, owner and facilitator of Making Ideas Visible, helped facilitate and guide Board Members, District Leaders, staff and advisors through the one-day planning process. This strategic "change" workshop was designed to identify and focus the organization on the pressing issues currently facing Georgia ForestWatch, including enhancing our visibility and building our organizational base through increased membership, partnerships, outreach and communication.

Facilitator Julie Stuart guiding us through the process.

While the one-day planning session provided a much-needed format for discussion and assessment of critical issues and how to address the same, the process did not and does not end there. The Board, along with staff, District Leaders and Advisors, continue to assess the concepts, issues and goals discussed at the planning session in an effort to prioritize key issues and develop a revised strategy for implementing our goals over the next few years. Two major areas of focus arising from the July strategic planning session were Outreach and Development, and these focus areas will guide much of the revision to our Strategic Plan for 2013-2015. The Board (thanks much in part to the diligent work of Board Member Brian Wills) is working on a comprehensive Outreach and Development Plan for 2013-2015 and beyond. The Board hopes to have this Outreach and Development Plan and Revised Strategic Plan for 2013-2015 approved at its next meeting in late October.

If you are interested in participating in the process or helping facilitate and/or implement the identified goals, please contact Mary Topa. ■

CoTrails

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the trails is a concern as well. Instead of putting these three proposed trails on the CRD 2014 Trail Plan Proposition, the Forest Service staff decided to make completion of the long-shelved Mountaintown Environmental Assessment (EA) a priority for FY 2014. Many of the trail-related projects proposed on the CRD are addressed in the EA, including the proposal submitted by Georgia ForestWatch to remove bikes from Mountaintown Creek Trail.

The second use change proposed on the CRD, allowing bikes on the Chickamauga Creek Trail, also was not advanced. Georgia ForestWatch is concerned about this change because of the extent of fragile riparian habitat, numerous stream crossings, and exceptional biodiversity noted on the trail during a hike several months ago. Some of the many different plants and birds observed are highlighted in an article on the trail in the summer 2013 Forest News.

Approximately eight new trail miles are included in the Blue Ridge Ranger District 2014 Trail Plan Proposition. District Leader Tom Colkett, who attended an open meeting at the district, reported that 3-4 of these miles would realign existing bike trails, taking them off Forest Service roads in the Jake-Bull Complex in an effort to mitigate erosion and maintenance demands. A controversial proposal

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Locust Stake OHV Area update

by Sarah Francisco : Board Advisor and Patrick Hunter : Southern Environmental Law Center

Georgia ForestWatch and the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC) continue to work to prevent further damage at the Locust Stake OHV area and ensure that the requisite environmental assessment is completed before the Forest Service makes any decisions about the area's future or reopens any trails there.

Locust Stake is located on the Chattooga River Ranger District, primarily in Stephens County, in the watershed of the North Fork of the Broad River, a designated trout stream. The trail system originally was formed from user-created trails, without planning or analysis of engineering, erosion risks, or potential harm to water quality. As a result, some trails became deeply entrenched – including one over twelve feet deep – and bled sediment into the tributaries of the North Fork. As long ago as 1996, the Forest Service's own assessment of the trails documented "unacceptable" erosion and recommended that the trails be closed; yet they remained open for another 16 years.

After again finding "unacceptable" natural resource damage and temporarily closing the trails in January 2012, the Forest Service hired an independent contractor to inventory the trails and recommend ways to make them more sustainable. However, the inventory did not include an overall environmental assessment of the trails. Following a site assessment in the summer of 2012, Georgia ForestWatch and SELC provided a substantial report to the Forest Service, with photos illustrating significant erosion and sedimentation of streams and an analysis of the legal issues posed by the trails. While we applauded the Forest Service's temporary closure and first steps to address the problem, we urged the agency to conduct a thorough environmental assessment, with full public participation, before reopening any trails or making further decisions about the system. The assessment should consider the system's soil, water, and other environmental impacts, long-term feasibility and sustainability, and alternatives for future management and restoration.

Photo credit: Sarah Francisco

District Leader Ben Cash assessing erosion on a Locust Stake trail.

With the help of ForestWatch District Leader Ben Cash and an expert environmental consultant, we also began conducting turbidity sampling in the North Fork in December 2012. Although the trails have been closed for over 18 months, early results suggest that they still are causing turbidity increases during significant rain events. Georgia ForestWatch also has visited the trail system with the Forest Service to point out areas of special concern.

Despite these efforts, this summer the Forest Service surprisingly indicated that it might reopen approximately half of the trail mileage later this summer or fall, and initiate an environmental assessment after the reopening. Georgia ForestWatch and SELC filed detailed objections to this plan and met with Forest Service staff to convey our concerns. Fortunately, at this time the area remains closed. Forest Service staff recently indicated that the agency plans to initiate an environmental assessment first, holding a public comment period this fall, and that the trails will likely remain closed at least until next spring. We will continue our efforts to secure the needed environmental assessment before decisions to reopen any trails are made, ensure legal compliance, prevent further resource damage, and give the public a voice in decisions about the future of these lands. ■

CoTrails

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submitted by the Union County government would connect the Byron Herbert Reece historic site with Vogel State Park. The CoTrails volunteer leadership questioned the need and plan for this two- mile trail, only a fraction of which is on the Forest.

No new trails are proposed on the Chattooga River Ranger District for 2014. A discussion to allow bikes on two more trails in the Lake Russell Wildlife Management Area has been ongoing for some time. When a formal proposal for this managed use change was submitted as part of the CoTrails I&O process, District Leader Ben Cash reviewed the proposal and submitted comments during an open meeting on the district. These issues were addressed, and the district moved the project forward.

All new trails, use changes, reroutes, decommissions, and roads to trails on the 2014 Trail Plan will proceed through the NEPA process, which could be completed by the end of 2014. A planning phase will follow the NEPA process, and then implementation on the ground. The timeline for all of these steps depends on the complexity of the project, with implementation of new trails possibly as soon as 2016. ■

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