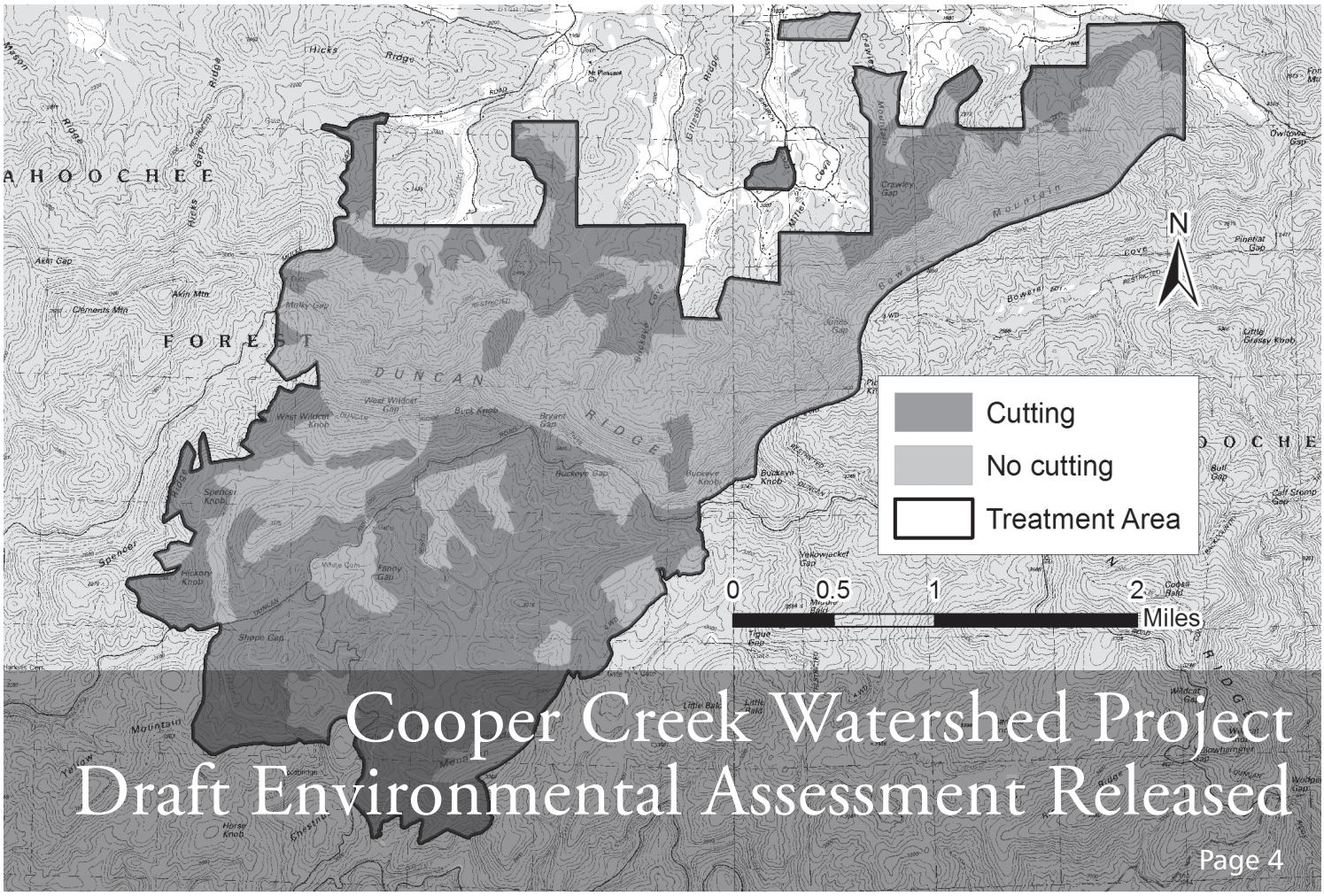
Forest News

Georgia ForestWatch Quarterly Newsletter Winter 2016



Cooper Creek Watershed Project Draft Environmental Assessment Released

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From the Director

Some wins in the 2016 omnibus appropriations package

Mary Topa
Executive Director

Georgia ForestWatch closely monitored activities on Capitol Hill in December because we were concerned about two provisions being considered for the proposed 2016 omnibus appropriations bill. The spending bill included an important lifeline for one of our most popular and successful land conservation programs, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). On the other end of the conservation spectrum was a proposed forest management provision that would allow the Forest Service to clear-cut up to 250 acres to create early successional habitat with an exemption from detailed environmental and public review. I'd like to thank all of you who responded to our alerts and contacted your senators and representatives on both issues. Now, the 2016 omnibus appropriations bill reauthorizes the LWCF for three years, and the forest management provision was not included in the spending bill.

Land and Water Conservation Fund

The 50-year-old LWCF is widely viewed as one of the nation's most popular and most successful land conservation programs. It has helped protect more than five million acres of land, including such national treasures as the Grand Canyon National Park, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, as well as local parks, ball fields, and trails. Created by Congress in 1964, the LWCF was a bipartisan commitment to provide funding that would safeguard natural areas, water resources and our cultural heritage, and provide recreation opportunities to all Americans. Money for the LWCF, up to $900 million per year, comes from royalties paid to the government by federal offshore oil and gas leases.

So when a handful of anti-conservation lawmakers derailed its reauthorization on September 30, 2015, ForestWatch joined in a push for renewed funding. As a result of a strong outpouring of support from environmentalists, the outdoor recreation community, state and local groups, Congressional proponents, and other citizens who have benefited from this program, Congress included reauthorization of LWCF in the 2016 omnibus spending bill. The provision guarantees $450 million in funding for 2016, and a renewal for three years at this same level of funding.

Although it is discouraging that permanent reauthorization of this successful program was derailed by a few extremists, this temporary reauthorization, passed in an incredibly tough political environment, is cause for some celebration. Still, we would like and deserve a permanent LWCF at the full appropriation of $900 million, and we should hold our Congressional lawmakers accountable until this happens.

Forest management provision

In December, ForestWatch learned that a potential deal to reform the nation's wildfire spending and to expedite logging on national forests was picking up momentum on Capitol Hill as a tag-along to the 2016 omnibus spending package. These forest management provisions would reduce environmental and public review for certain types of logging projects and other activities in national forests. Of particular concern was a possible new categorical exclusion (CE) for intensive logging of up to 250 acres to create early successional habitat. A new CE – a new exemption from the normal rules for environmental analysis and public input – would promote creating early successional habitat only by intensive logging of mature forest, and would contradict our efforts to encourage more restoration-oriented forest management. This CE would have had a disproportionate, harmful impact on the Chattahoochee-Oconee and other national forests in the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

Along with other local groups in the region, ForestWatch quickly scrambled to inform our members of this development. We urged our members to tell their senators and representatives not to include these forest management provisions in the appropriations bill. It was critical for our lawmakers to hear directly from citizens who use and benefit from our national forests, not just from environmental organizations. Thankfully, our efforts were rewarded. The forest management provisions, including the early succession/logging CE, were NOT in the omnibus bill. In addition, the bill provides an extra $500 million for wildfire funding, which may be enough for the Forest Service to avoid borrowing from other USFS programs to pay for firefighting in 2016. Stay tuned – some lawmakers may try again to push through new forest management legislation in 2016.

Whether the issue is local, regional or national, it is important to let elected officials know that you care about your neighborhood, your community, and places you love. When national forest policies in Congress are driven by what's happening out West, it is critical to let our elected officials know that our unique Southern Appalachian forests have different needs. Just by being members of Georgia ForestWatch, I know that you care about all the special places in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests and want to preserve this amazing legacy for future generations. ForestWatch staff and dedicated volunteers work hard to keep you informed about projects in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests as well as any federal issues that may impact how our national forests are managed. We thank you for your advocacy efforts during 2015 – know that your voice is important!

Mary A. Topa

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

Paula Adams
Benjamin Armstrong
Barbara Bowen
Sharon Bryant
Alex Bullock
Margaret Childers
Maureen Donohue
Rachel Doughty
Sherry Hadder
Patrick Hunter
Nancy Knudegard
Carole McCollum
Drew Parker
Jeffrey Sellers

UPCOMING OUTINGS & EVENTS

January 26th
Georgia ForestWatch Board Meeting

January 27th-28th
Evening Presentation at Winter Tree ID Hike
at the Len Foote Hike Inn
Jess Riddle

February 12th & 27th
Hike with Sue Harmon
Locations TBD

Email info@gafw.org to reserve your spot today!
We are finalizing the details for more hikes and will post them on our website. To receive hike alerts and registration information you need to join our email alert program found on our website at www.gafw.org.

A Special Thanks to These Forest Guardians

John & Beverly Baker Fund
James Baugh
Bradley Currey, Jr.
John T. and Sara Godwin Fund / Patricia & John Dunleavy
EarthShare of Georgia
EMSA Fund, Inc.
Roger & Jean Johnson
Rene & Paul Kane
Bob & Jane Kibler
Shirley & Rick McDonald
John & Marilyn McMullan
R. Howard Dobbs, Jr. Foundation
Denny & Lois Rhodes
Thomas & Ann Rhodes
Southern Environmental Law Center
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Cover photo credit: Forest Ecologist Jess Riddle

Cooper Creek Watershed Project Draft Environmental Assessment Released

by Jim Walker : District Leader

In the summer 2014 issue of *Forest News* I wrote that the Cooper Creek Watershed Project is by far the most objectionable project I have seen in 12 years of forest watching. Since then the Forest Service has modified its original proposal. The new proposal, Alternative 3, is a significant improvement (Alternative 1 is no action, and Alternative 2 is the originally proposed action). In this alternative, the area to be cut is reduced from 3,754 acres to 2,591, and the area in which herbicides will be used is reduced from 3,251 acres to 1,327. Despite these changes, the new alternative is still unacceptable from Georgia ForestWatch's perspective.

Our primary concerns are with three parts of the project:

1. 7.E.1

Everything in the project area north of Duncan Ridge is in Management Prescription 7.E.1, which, according to the Forest Plan, is "unsuitable for timber production, not appropriate." Alternative 3 decreases the number of stands to be commercially harvested in 7.E.1 from 30 to 14 and retains 15 stands proposed for noncommercial "Midstory Treatment," which according to the scoping notice, would be "in preparation for stand regeneration," i.e., harvesting of almost all of the canopy sometime in the future.

Prescription 7.E.1 does permit "sales necessary to protect other multi-use values, or activities that meet other plan goals." However, as Sarah Francisco of the Southern Environmental Law Center has pointed out, the purpose of 7.E.1 is to prevent the degradation of recreational opportunities, and there is absolutely no reason why the objectives of the proposed timber harvests must necessarily be accomplished within Management Prescription 7.E.1.

2. "Woodland Restoration"

The Forest Plan defines woodland as, "A plant community in which trees are often small, characteristically with a greater proportion of their total height being crown than clear bole, and having trees spaced far enough apart that the canopies of adjacent trees usually do not touch and with the ground vegetation being mostly herbaceous, commonly grass." There are very few naturally occurring areas conforming to this definition anywhere on the Chattahoochee National Forest, and the ones that can be found are very small, much smaller than the 720 acres proposed for "woodland restoration" in the Cooper Creek Watershed Project. Certainly there was a significant amount of open canopy when the mountains were full of people farming and cutting timber, but there is absolutely no evidence that a natural, self-sustaining woodland ever existed on this site.

Creation of woodland on a site like this requires cutting most of the trees, application of large amounts of herbicide, and frequent burning. All of this has been done at Brawley Mountain since the implementation of that project began in 2010, and so far the results are questionable at best.

The Introduction to the Forest Plan says that the Plan is based on "an adaptive management approach," which means "practicing restorative ecosystem management with the understanding that we are students of nature, not masters of it." As "students of nature," the Forest Service should not attempt any extensive creation or "restoration" of woodland until it has demonstrated that it is capable of doing this on a much smaller scale, and even then only on sites that show clear signs of having supported natural woodland in the past.

3. Bryant Creek

Most of the Cooper Creek Watershed Project is concentrated in the watershed of Bryant Creek, a tributary of Cooper Creek. Some kind of treatment, mostly commercial timber production, is proposed for over 80% of the stands in that watershed. Alternative 2 calls for treatment of 1,707 acres in the Bryant Creek watershed, of which 104 acres were dropped in Alternative 3.

Bryant Creek is one of the largest and best, if not the very best, native brook trout streams in Georgia. Because native brook trout cannot adequately compete with stocked, non-native rainbow and brown trout, significant brook trout populations persist only above some barrier that keeps out the non-natives. Bryant Creek has such a waterfall barrier. In 2012, the Forest Service spent $170,000 to replace an old, deteriorating culvert with a new, bottomless arch where FS33A crosses Bryant Creek to connect brook trout habitat above and below the site.

In regard to brook trout habitat, Michael Joyce, the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests' Fisheries Biologist, has written, "Historic land use practices resulted in increased sediment into streams, which caused them to widen, resulting in shallow water depths with long stretches of homogenous run/glide habitat. The shallower water can lead to increased water temperatures. … Over the years the Chattahoochee National Forest has matured and most areas, including riparian areas, are well vegetated. This has resulted in a reduction in sediment delivery to the streams. … In addition, … brook trout populations are also subjected to extreme conditions as a result of droughts, warm summer water temperatures and flood events."

And yet the Forest Service, counter to its own concerns about the future of brook trout and its efforts to protect them, is proposing a cumulative disturbance on the Bryant Creek watershed such as never been seen since the clearcutting era decades ago. The proposed timber harvest, with extensive temporary roads, skid trails, and landings, cannot fail to increase siltation, and removal of half or more of the canopy may raise water temperatures beyond what brook trout can tolerate.

The Forest Service's draft Environmental Assessment finally came out in late December, and responses are due by February 5th. Georgia ForestWatch will have a lot to say, but we also need your help. Please let the Forest Service know how special the Cooper Creek area is. More information on how to comment can be found on our website at www.gafw.org/current-issue-cooper-creek-watershed-project/. ■

Forest Plan revisions: Opportunities and challenges

by Sarah Francisco and Patrick Hunter : Southern Environmental Law Center

Each national forest has its own management plan that functions as a blueprint for management across the forest. Every project or activity in a specific location within the forest, such as timber sales, road construction, or wildlife habitat management, must be consistent with the plan. Forest plans are revised, with public input, every 15 years or more, most recently on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests (CONF) in 2004. Revisions provide a major opportunity to move towards greater protection and conservation of forest ecosystems and the values and uses they support.

Georgia ForestWatch's engagement in the next CONF plan revision will be critical to furthering those goals. To participate effectively, ForestWatch and its partners should be prepared at the beginning of the process to hone in on priorities and to offer specific recommendations for the new plan. Recommendations should be well-supported with verifiable information. This is a substantial undertaking. Although the Forest Service is not expected to officially initiate the next CONF plan revision for several years, now is the time to start preparing. ForestWatch already is embarking on this by beginning an update of Georgia's Mountain Treasures, a report identifying special areas on the CONF.

Two other national forests in the Southeast recently revised or are in the process of revising their plans. The George Washington National Forest in Virginia revised its plan in 2014. The plan for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests in North Carolina is currently in the revision process. In 2012, the Forest Service overhauled its rules for forest plans, and the Nantahala-Pisgah plan is one of the first being revised under the new rules. We can draw timely and important lessons from these two revisions, as well as from conservation groups' experiences with forest planning across the region since the mid-1980s.

Key Forest Plan Decisions

Forest plans set desired conditions, objectives, standards, and guidelines that apply across the forest. For example, plans provide for ecosystem sustainability and plant and animal species diversity, set the maximum amount of timber harvest allowed, and establish stream buffers and other mitigation measures. Plans also divide the forest into certain geographic "management areas" or "management prescriptions" that are managed for certain resources, such as backcountry recreation or game wildlife, and identify the area's "suitability" for various uses, such as timber production or new road construction. Therefore, a plan revision offers opportunities to improve forest-wide standards and to better protect particular areas. Forest plans also may recommend specific areas for permanent protection by Congress as designated wilderness. Per plan revision rules, the Forest Service must identify areas that may possess wilderness characteristics, and then evaluate those areas for wilderness recommendation. Recommended areas are managed accordingly in the forest plan until Congress passes a bill to permanently protect the area as wilderness.

Areas can also be congressionally-protected as national scenic areas or national recreation areas. Although forest plans do not commonly recommend these designations, the George Washington National Forest forest plan's recommendation of the 90,000-acre Shenandoah Mountain National Scenic Area shows that a national scenic area or national recreation area recommendation is possible. That recommendation responded to a high level of public support from diverse stakeholders, which took years to build and required collaboration and compromise with those who were opposed.

In our experience, the Forest Service will consider recommending wilderness or other designations only when there is strong public support from diverse interests and a low degree of opposition. If Georgia ForestWatch wishes to seek these recommendations in the next CONF plan, it will be up to ForestWatch and its partners to build that support and to avoid or reduce conflicts by working with other forest users.

Inventory and Evaluation of Potential Wilderness Areas *(formerly called Roadless Areas)*

The inventory of potential wilderness areas presents an opportunity to press the Forest Service to identify areas that were wrongly excluded from past inventories of "roadless areas." The 2001 national roadless rule only applies to previously "inventoried roadless areas" – 64,870 acres of the CONF. However, additional areas identified during plan revision can – and we believe should – be protected in forest plans with "management prescriptions" appropriate to each area's particular characteristics, values, and uses. Appropriate prescriptions may include backcountry recreation, scenic areas, rare species habitats, old growth forest, or ecological restoration.

An inventory of undeveloped and unroaded or lightly roaded areas is only the first step. The inventory does not recommend wilderness designation, and some areas won't be good candidates for designation. Once all qualifying areas are properly inventoried, then there should be a robust discussion of alternatives for their future management.

Updating Georgia's Mountain Treasures

In 1995, The Wilderness Society, with assistance from Georgia ForestWatch and others, published a report called Georgia's Mountain Treasures: the Unprotected Wildlands of the Chattahoochee

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Around the forest

by Jess Riddle : Forest Ecologist

Conasauga Ranger District

The Armuchee Ridges around Villanow continue to be a center of district activity. Georgia ForestWatch recently commented on the Johns Mountain Timber Stand and Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project, which modifies and extends activities of the Armuchee Ridges Project and other existing projects. The new project consists of mid-story removal, growing-season prescribed burning, and creating wildlife openings and vernal pools. Stands slated for mid-story removal have already been approved for overstory thinning, and the growing-season burns follow completed or planned dormant season burns. Vernal pool creation is new. Vernal pools are small ponds that hold water for only part of the year. Since there are no fish, vernal pools can provide excellent breeding habitat for amphibians. Our comments in response to the scoping were fairly brief, because more intense management has already been approved for this area under other projects. We will continue to discuss project concerns with the Forest Service, but additional formal public comment periods are unlikely.

In the same general area, the district's proposal to treat pine stands to reduce the risk of southern pine beetle infestation could set an important precedent. This project is the first on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests proposed under the 2014 Farm Bill, an amendment to the 2003 Healthy Forest Restoration Act. The amendment is aimed at streamlining responses to forest insect and disease epidemics. It allows certain forest health projects to be excluded from most public review under the National Environmental Policy Act, which is the primary means of public input on Forest Service projects. However, the amendment also requires a "transparent and non-exclusive" collaborative process that includes "diverse interests."

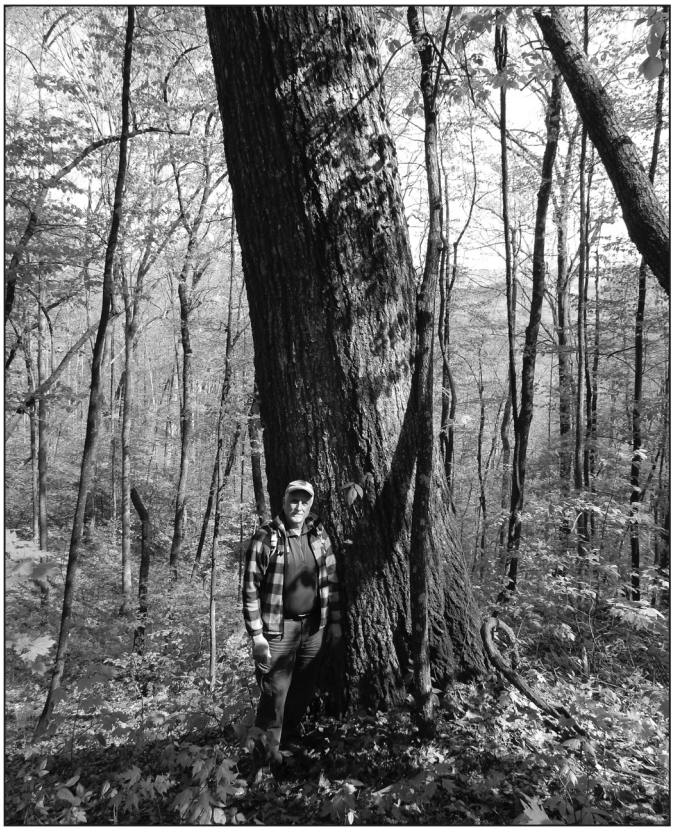

Photo credit: Jess Riddle

District Leader Tom Colkett in the Cooper Creek project area

The district appears to have taken those requirements to heart. On December 3rd, they held a public meeting to introduce the project, explain the Healthy Forest Restoration Act requirements, and begin receiving feedback on how to implement the project. Thinning planted loblolly pine stands will likely make up most of the project. Which stands should be treated, whether any other species should be included, and how they should be treated to reduce pine beetle risk is still open to discussion, though. The next meeting on the project will be in February, 2016.

Georgia ForestWatch is also monitoring plans to build an "inland port" on the Conasauga District's doorstep by 2018. Existing rail lines would carry containers from Savannah to a new facility just north of Chatsworth that would load them onto tractor-trailers. That location puts the facility upwind of the national forest and the Cohutta Wilderness Area. This plan has raised public concerns about exhaust pollution and impacts to streams in the famously diverse Conasauga River watershed. We are currently assessing potential impacts to national forest lands and will follow the progress of this project.

Blue Ridge Ranger District

The Blue Ridge District is also selecting stands for a Healthy Forest Restoration Act project, but they have not solicited any public input yet. The project appears broader in scope. Southern pine beetle prevention will likely be a major component, but the district has also indicated they will target other unspecified forest health issues. We will keep you informed as this project develops and when there are opportunities for public involvement.

The single biggest issue on the forest right now is the Cooper Creek Watershed Project. The district has released the draft environmental assessment, which contains all the analysis and plans for the project. The latest plans include some improvements, but most of the major problems with this troubling project remain (see "Cooper Creek Watershed Project Draft Environmental Assessment Released" on page 4 of this issue for more details). Comments are due February 5th.

Chattooga River Ranger District

The district issued the final decision notice for the Upper Warwoman Watershed Management Project. The final decision closely resembles the draft decision, which we did not object to. This decision brings to a close two decades of struggle by Georgia ForestWatch, the Southern Environmental Law Center and other conservation partners that resulted in improvements to the project. For more information on the project and how our

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Forest Plan Revisions

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National Forest. The report identified and mapped 235,700 acres in 44 areas that have special ecological, scenic, recreational, historic, or cultural values and merit protection in some form, ranging from congressional designation to administrative or forest plan protections. Endorsed by 16 local, regional, and national conservation organizations, this report was a major building block for conservation groups' recommendations during the 2004 plan revision.

Georgia ForestWatch has begun updating Georgia's Mountain Treasures. This multi-year effort will include use of GIS and field investigations to assess current conditions in the Mountain Treasure areas and to analyze each area's qualifications for the next potential wilderness inventory. This work will inform advocacy for the inventory of potential wilderness areas and other proposals for the forest plan, such as management areas or direction for ecological sustainability.

On both the George Washington National Forest and the Nantahala-Pisgah National Forest, Mountain Treasure reports were developed or updated in preparation for plan revision. Although the Nantahala-Pisgah National Forest inventory is still a work in progress, at this point the Forest Service has added a number of areas that The Wilderness Society and other groups identified in Mountain Treasures and repeatedly nominated for the inventory. The George Washington National Forest inventory was substantially expanded as well.

Public Participation in Forest Planning

The new 2012 forest planning rules require the agency to offer public participation opportunities early in the revision and at every step in the process. Our experience with the Nantahala-Pisgah National Forests plan revision has underscored the importance of being well-prepared for the first formal stage of public participation – the "assessment." In this phase, the Forest Service assesses the existing condition of national forest resources and considers the trends if no changes were made to the current plan. Based on the assessment, the Forest Service identifies needs to change the plan. Because these early phases drive overall development of the plan revision, it is critical that conservation groups develop priorities in advance and be prepared to offer information and recommendations at the very beginning of the process. Completing the update of Georgia's Mountain Treasures and related analyses are essential components of this preparation.

Now is also a key time to begin educating not only Georgia ForestWatch members, but also other individuals, local and regional conservation organizations, and other potential allies about forest plan revision and its opportunities. The Georgia's Mountain Treasures update will be an important tool for public outreach and engagement.

The new rules also encourage the Forest Service to use a "collaborative process," making collaboration a formal part of the process for the first time. While there are various definitions of "collaboration," the rules define a collaborative process as a "structured manner in which a collection of people with diverse interests share knowledge, ideas, and resources while working together in an inclusive and cooperative manner toward a common purpose."

Because the agency is promoting collaboration right now, some type of public collaborative process will likely be convened for the upcoming plan revision. In our experience, collaboratives that are inclusive, representative, run fairly, and operating within existing laws can be productive, while poorly run collaboratives can be counter-productive. On the George Washington National Forest, a diverse group of stakeholders, including representatives of wilderness and other environmental organizations, the timber industry, hunting and fishing groups, the state game and fish agency, hikers, and mountain bikers, worked together in an informal collaborative. The group reached consensus on a set of recommendations for roadless areas, wilderness and national scenic areas, timber, and wildlife management, and most were included in the final plan. The group is continuing to work together as projects to carry out the new plan are developed. We have high hopes that a collaborative process for the Nantahala-Pisgah National Forest plan revision can be successful as well.

Whether or not a formal collaborative is convened for the next CONF revision, the early stages of plan revision can be a useful time for Georgia ForestWatch and partners to reach out to individuals or organizations that have differing views or goals for the CONF, seek greater understanding of everyone's respective objectives, and explore the potential for avoiding or resolving conflicts on certain points. ForestWatch should be prepared to participate in collaborative groups, as well as pursue more traditional grassroots, scientific, and legal advocacy to further its goals in the plan revision process.

Conclusion

While forest plan revision offers major opportunities, it presents significant challenges as well. Georgia ForestWatch and its partners can take advantage of the lead time to build a broad network of supporters and allies and, with their input, develop priorities, proposals, and supporting information. Once the revision process formally begins, early, pro-active, sustained participation by ForestWatch, its members and partners will be essential. This approach will help ForestWatch take advantage of the opportunity to seek a revised forest plan that places greater emphasis on protection and restoration of the CONF. ■

Wild & Woolly
FOREST FESTIVAL

Annual Spring Fundraiser

Apri 30th, 2016
Mark your calendars!

Chickamauga Creek Trail hike with Forest Ecologist Jess Riddle

by Laura LeMay : Outreach Coordinator

There's a special feeling you get when you wake up to head out for a drive through the north Georgia mountains to meet with your friends for a ForestWatch outing. This particular morning I was meeting Jess Riddle and Allison and Cob Bailey for a hike along the Chickamauga Creek Trail. The air was crisp and the last stretch of the drive out to the trail head was littered with colorful wet leaves. It was a stunning day in autumn.

All of us had attended the fall retreat in October, and after sharing a few memories from the event, we left the parking area and hit the trail. Chickamauga Creek Trail is a 6-mile loop, with about half of the trail following right along the creek in a rich riparian area. Since Allison, Cob, and I had never been on this trail, we had a lot to learn from Jess. We talked about possible environmental impacts on trails in riparian areas and why it is so important to take caution in such fragile, rich areas of the forest.

We identified numerous plants with Jess, some rare and some common. There are some great rock outcrops along the trail also. Allison made sure these were all entered into Cob's GPS unit because she has a friend who is compiling a geological snapshot of Georgia. Allison always takes note of any rock outcrops she finds while out on a trail. What a great friend!

Terrain along the Chickamauga Creek Trail is really nice, with rolling ups and downs through different types of forest. It was interesting to learn about about the different types of vegetation growing in the various areas, and how their adaptations help them flourish there.

Hiking with Georgia ForestWatch outing leaders is a great opportunity to enlighten your outlook on the forest from a number of aspects. Our outings can include anything from nature photography, scenic vistas, poetry and music, to issue hikes that will lead you into areas of the national forest that need your support. They are a great way to get out into the woods with like-minded folks who care about the future of Georgia's national forests.

Photo credit: Allison Bailey

A friendly pollinator busy at work on the Chickamauga Creek Trail

All of our outings and events are updated regularly and are showcased on our online calendar at http://gafw.org/outings-events/ and on our Facebook and Twitter pages. For more information on how to get involved with our outings and events, or to sign up for a hike, please contact us at info@gafw.org. Happy trails everyone! ■

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The Oconee District – A Piedmont conservation success story that could be even better

by John Paul Schmidt : District Leader

The 115,000-acre Oconee National Forest is the only Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests ranger district located entirely in Georgia's Piedmont region. As Paul Sutter notes in his 2015 book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Gullies: Providence Canyon and the Soils of the South*, Piedmont national forest lands, unlike those in the mountains, originated in a federal mission to control soil erosion, and have been managed differently, with a primary focus on pine silviculture. In fact, for several decades, before the Forest Service ended the timber program on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, timber harvested from the Oconee Ranger District was a major revenue generator for the entire forest. While pine production on the Oconee District is, as intended, an excellent demonstration of what environmentally sensitive and soil-conserving forestry practices should look like – broad riparian buffers, slopes maintained in hardwood and mixed forest, bottomlands largely set aside – its predominance diminishes the potential value of the district for recreation. Despite a number of unique and expansive examples of Piedmont natural communities, the district has few dedicated hiking trails and mainly attracts hunters, fishermen, boaters, horseback-riders, and off-road vehicle enthusiasts.

The value of the Oconee District as non-game wildlife habitat – other than the red-cockaded woodpecker – has also received short shrift. The 1995 designation of the forest south of I-20 as a Habitat Management Area to support recovery of this federally endangered woodpecker resulted in a management regime of regular controlled burns to maintain most uplands as open pine savannas. Around the same time, burning not just uplands, but also on slopes and bottomlands was scaled up as Congress provided increased funding for prescribed fire on the national forests. This policy was intended to reduce the threat of catastrophic fires on public lands in the West, but now is in effect nationwide. Although fire, beneficial for some species, and important in managing some habitats, was certainly present historically in the Piedmont, the long-term effects on ecosystems and plant and animal populations are uncertain. A third of the Oconee District is target for controlled burns each winter and early spring – a level of burning that seems to be motivated by budget rather than management priorities.

Despite its origins in an effort to retire degraded lands from farming, the Oconee District is made up of a diversity of forest types and terrains. Small scenic outcrops, knobs or mounts formed from mafic geology that were preserved as woodlots during the agricultural era are scattered across uplands where they support a dry oak-hickory forest that often includes Shumard oak. The Monticello glades, an extensive area of mafic uplands underlain by an impervious layer creating semi-wetland conditions, supports an unusual species assemblage that includes sabal palmetto (*Sabal minor*) and the rare Oglethorpe oak (*Quercus oglethorpensis*). The 1,100-acre Murder Creek Research Natural Area, designated by Congress in the 1970s, protects an impressive remnant of mature Piedmont bottomland hardwoods. Equally impressive bottomland hardwoods occur along Rock Creek southwest of Eatonton where open pine-oak woodlands cover slopes and uplands. The Scull Shoals area in Oglethorpe and northern Greene counties forms a 4,000-acre contiguous section of forest surrounding a large complex of beaver ponds and associated wetlands. Large contiguous holdings with sizeable expanses of swamp and bottomland forest in the Ocmulgee and Oconee drainages make up the southernmost portion of the Oconee National Forest in Jasper, Jones and Putnam counties. Other sensitive or rare plant species with known populations on the district include relict trillium (*Trillium reliquum*), ovate catchfly (*Silene ovata*), lance-leaved trillium (*Trillium lancifolium*), trailing trillium (*Trillium decumbens*), Carolina anemone (*Anemone caroliniana*), shooting star (*Dodecatheon meadia*), log fern (*Dryopteris celsa*), southern twayblade orchid (*Listera australis*), bottomland skullcap (*Scutellaria nervosa*), and oval ladies tresses (*Spiranthes ovalis*).

Photo credit: JP Schmidt

District Leader JP Schmidt

Despite the diversity and extent of unique, high-quality Piedmont natural areas on the Oconee National Forest, only 7% of the forest is set aside either congressionally as wilderness, national recreation, national scenic, or research natural areas, or as botanical or recreation areas within the Forest Plan. Nor has the potential to expand the best-preserved existing features been given adequate consideration as a management goal within the Plan. The upcoming revision of the Forest Plan provides the opportunity to address these issues and, hopefully, to broaden conservation and restoration efforts on Georgia's Piedmont national forest. ■

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The Eastern Hellbender: A threatened giant of the Appalachian ecosystem

by Stephen Spear : Associate Conservation Scientist, The Orianne Society (www.oriannesociety.org)

The forests and mountains of northern Georgia, along with those in North Carolina and Tennessee, are a global hotspot for salamander species. Not only are there a lot of species, but most are really abundant in our forests. For instance, I recently led a Georgia ForestWatch outing near the Three Forks Appalachian Trailhead, and we found seven different species within the first half mile or so. The species ranged from the highly aquatic shovelnose and black-bellied salamanders, to the terrestrial Chattahoochee slimy salamander. A typical Appalachian forest might harbor thousands of these little amphibians, easily found by looking under a log or a rock in a stream. One could certainly get the impression that all salamanders here are not in any danger of declining. And while the long-term threats of climate change and forest loss could pose very real problems for a number of Appalachian salamanders, it is true that many of these northern Georgia populations appear to be stable at the moment.

However, there is a very prominent salamander found in our mountains whose populations generally are not stable and it is also not small. The rocks it lives under in rivers are not easy to lift, and even if you do, you may destroy its home. It belongs to an ancient line of salamanders and its closest relatives are two species in China and Japan. This salamander is the hellbender (also nicknamed "snot otters"). It is the largest salamander by weight in North America and it can reach over two feet in length.

In many ways, the hellbender is perfectly adapted to living on the bottoms of streams and rivers. It has a flattened body that allows it to move easily through the current and slide into small spaces under large rocks. The large number of skin folds on its sides allows a hellbender to more easily take up oxygen through its skin. That's right – hellbenders get 90% of their oxygen underwater, through their skin. They do have lungs but lack gills, so to stay underwater they need to breathe through their skin. Even though hellbenders are big, most people never see them because they spend most of their time under large rocks, which provide shelter and a place to ambush their favorite food, crayfish. In fact, the name hellbender may very well have come from observations of this large, weird-looking salamander emerging from under a boulder that could be imagined as a gate to the underworld. Rocks are also used as nesting sites, where males (known as den masters) vigorously fight off rival males while females lay strings of eggs for males to fertilize. Afterwards, the females leave and the males guard the eggs and larvae, often for half a year.

Photo credit: Kevin Stohlgren

Hellbenders are perfectly adapted to living on the bottoms of streams and rivers

Photo credit: Stephen Spear

Outing participants observe a salamander that was discovered on the hike

As you might imagine, a species that is so well suited to an aquatic life could be impacted by threats to the aquatic environment. A hellbender's ability to take up oxygen through its skin means that it requires high levels of dissolved oxygen, but pollutants can also pass into its body. When erosion occurs due to deforestation, the sediment washes into the streams and fills in spaces under the rocks that hellbenders rely on. River impoundments not only fragment hellbender populations but also create reservoirs that are not suitable for this riverine species.

Hellbenders have declined across their range (from New York to Georgia as far west as Missouri). Although it is difficult to demonstrate conclusively a cause and effect relationship, researchers

such as Dr. Brian Miller at Middle Tennessee State University have documented drastic declines of formerly common populations in areas around middle Tennessee where forest cover has been lost and land conversion taken place. Areas where some reproducing hellbender populations can still be reliably found include western Pennsylvania, western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, and northern Georgia. These areas all have extensive national forest land remaining that helps protect hellbender habitat. When the forests go, the hellbender populations appear to suffer as well.

Even in the good areas, there is some cause for alarm. A 2005 study that surveyed 21 historic sites in Georgia found hellbenders in only 13 sites, and only nine of these were considered reproducing populations. These reproducing sites occur in the Toccoa and Hiwassee drainages. Hellbender populations in the Chickamauga drainage in northwest Georgia and the Little Tennessee drainage in northeast Georgia have either disappeared or have been greatly reduced in size.

Fortunately, hellbenders are starting to get the conservation attention they need and deserve. In Georgia, the Department of Natural Resources has been conducting population surveys to find new populations and making sure known populations are still stable. And my organization, The Orianne Society, is working with multiple partners across Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee to help inventory populations and reverse declines. We developed an environmental DNA (eDNA) test for hellbenders that is now being used across its range to non-invasively detect hellbender presence simply by collecting water samples and testing for the presence of hellbender DNA. This not only allows us to sample more sites than snorkel surveys alone, but also we don't have to disturb the rocks to determine hellbender presence. Of course, eDNA can't yet tell us about the age of individuals or if the population is stable, so we use it as a complement to snorkel surveys.

Beyond inventory efforts, The Orianne Society is working to help restore hellbender habitat in areas where land use has changed. We are working with Rabun Gap School to stabilize streambanks and exclude cattle in a key Little Tennessee tributary. Where rocks have silted in, we are planning to place artificial nest shelters to provide habitat and opportunities to breed. It is our hope that such restoration measures will help the hellbender hold on in habitats where forests have already been reduced. But in areas like the Toccoa and Hiwassee drainages, the best hellbender conservation measure is to prevent the degradation of this key river habitat by keeping these forests as intact as possible. And if you do encounter one of these mysterious salamanders? Treasure the moment. Leave it alone as it is completely harmless to humans. And let us know about the sightings, preferably with a photo, as it will help us keep tabs on where this species still occurs -- and hopefully will remain into the future. ■

Around the Forest

(continued from page 6)

voices were heard, see the Fall 2015 issue of *Forest News*. We will stay involved with this project as stands are laid out and trees are marked to ensure the project is implemented as planned.

Oconee Ranger District

On December 2nd, the district held its annual Oconee Forest Health and Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project public meeting. Presentations reviewed 2015 activities on this broad project, and gave a general outline for the next couple of years. Much of the project focuses on creating open pine stands for the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Treatments toward that end included 19,663 acres of prescribed fire, about 1,200 acres of thinning or midstory removal, and 75 acres of non-native invasive species treatment (mostly Chinese privet). The district's targets for next year are similar with some adjustment to the acreages. Other project activities include putting artificial nest inserts in trees and planting longleaf pine in areas where southern pine beetle killed other pines in 2007. During the question and answer period, much of the discussion focused on longleaf pine restoration and public support for Chinese privet removal. The district continuously accepts feedback on the project through ofhwhip_comments@fs.fed.us. ■

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