Forest News

Georgia ForestWatch Quarterly Newsletter Fall 2019

Another Fun Fall Retreat

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From the Director

Jess Riddle
Executive Director

Once again recently I found myself in a public Forest Service (FS) meeting listening to the FS answer a question and wondering what it would take for them look at forest management differently. I was at the annual meeting for OFHWHIP (Oconee Forest Health and Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project – acronym much needed), the Oconee Ranger District's massive project that pre-approves FS timber harvests, prescribed burns, and invasive species control on about two-thirds of the District. Much of the project is driven by the red cockaded woodpecker, a federally endangered bird for which the FS is legally required to manage habitat. The woodpecker requires open woods for foraging and old pine trees for nesting.

The FS piqued my curiosity with their plans to thin one of the oldest pine stands on the District, loblolly pines around 120 years old. If the woodpeckers need old pines, why was the District planning to cut some of their oldest pines? They explained they were concerned the pines would all die at once, which would leave the woodpeckers with nothing.

Visit Congaree National Park and you can see 190-year-old loblolly pines. Over fifteen years, I've seen many of the pines die, but they've done so a few at a time, not all at once. Since I'd seen forest that contradicted the FS's concern, I asked if they had any evidence to validate their concern. The conversation turned, and the Forest Service never supported their concern.

While I disagree with the FS's decision in this case, the bigger problem is the nature of the dialogue. The FS gave no indication they wanted to hear different ideas or were open to a better approach. While the discussion was polite and professional, they seemed to have reached a hard conclusion and viewed their responsibility as defending their decision. To be fair, many FS staff are open to genuine discussions and have put in extra effort to accommodate public feedback. However, when you see this defensive approach often enough to expect it, the approach undermines the FS's claims they want to collaborate.

Imminent Foothills Landscape meetings bring this issue to the fore. The FS wants to collaborate on the site specific decisions – where to cut trees, where to burn – only after the official National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. That approve-first-collaborate-later scenario is what the FS has with OFHWHIP, and we are seeing how poorly it works in the real world. In contrast, the traditional approach discloses all the locations of specific FS actions during the NEPA review. NEPA requires the FS to consider public comments, and if the public isn't happy, they can object to the project. If a resolution cannot be found through an objection, people can sue. With Foothills, the FS is asking the public to give up that recourse, and promising they will remain responsive to public concerns.

The FS is made up of well-intentioned people doing hard jobs. Sometimes the job is so hard they are tempted to think there is only one way to get things done. Part of the service the public provides is shifting the spotlight of attention and widening the options. But the public can only do that if all the necessary information is disclosed before decisions are made.

Jess Riddle

A New Face & Voice at ForestWatch

by Lyn Hopper, Office Manager

You may hear a new voice when you call our office. It is a thrill for me to introduce to you my new job-sharing partner, Angela Butler-Hackett! Angela began work on November 4, and she is learning the job quickly. Angela holds a degree in Recreation Therapy from the University of Georgia, and has focused on wellness for more than 35 years. She has taught fitness and wellness for older adults for over 25 years in settings including independent living, assisted living, long-term care, and physical rehabilitation. Her career path has provided opportunities for management at varying levels. Angela's ongoing quest for mindfulness and wellness always leads her back to nature and appreciating its resources. Her goal is to support the mission of Georgia ForestWatch in preserving and protecting our natural resources.

Photo credit: Fox Gradin, Celestial Studios

How to save on taxes and support Georgia ForestWatch

by Ted Doll : Former Georgia ForestWatch Board Member

Uncle Sam may forgive the tax that you owe on an IRA withdrawal when you give it to Georgia ForestWatch! If you are 70 ½ years of age or older and have a traditional, tax-deferred IRA, the government requires that you take "Required Minimum Distributions" (RMDs) every year. The RMDs are payouts from your IRA that increase each year beyond your 70 ½ th birthday.

There is a provision that now allows you to avoid the tax on your RMD (payout) ***if you have it sent directly*** to a non-profit organization like Georgia ForestWatch. That provision is called the Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD). When you file your taxes, the amount of your QCD is deducted from your taxable income. So the whole amount is not taxed. This route is superior to simply itemizing deductions, since for most people their total deductions don't exceed to new standard deduction of $12,000 for individuals or $24,000 for married couples filing jointly.

To do a QCD you must call the financial firm that administers your IRA. Give them the name and mailing address of Georgia ForestWatch, and ***have them send the check directly to GAFW.*** No withholding is needed, since the whole distribution is non-taxable.

More information on QCDs can be found at https://www.kitces.com/blog/qualified-charitable-distribution-qcd-from-ira-to-satisfy-rmd-rules-and-requirements/, and at the IRS website (https://www.irs.gov/publications/p590b/ch01.html#en_US_2015_publink100041439).

Of course, you should consult your tax attorney or knowledgeable CPA for guidance on how to do a QCD and claim it on your federal income tax.

Thanks for your support in protecting the National Forests! ■

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Cover photo credit: Andrew Linker
Fall retreat attendees enjoy an informative presentation.

Union County target range

by Nick Nichols : Georgia ForestWatch Member/Volunteer

Last October, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) announced a proposed Special Use Permit for a target range to be located on Chattahoochee National Forest land in Union County. Located off Highway 180 near Brasstown Bald, the 15-acre gun range would be constructed by Union County on property leased from the USFS. It would be managed by the private-membership Union County Gun Club, and on most days, would be used exclusively by Gun Club members or the Union County Sheriff's Department.

The National Environmental Policy Act requires the USFS to conduct environmental studies on certain proposed activities like the proposed gun range. This process includes requirements for public notice and "scoping" of the proposed action; preparation of draft and final reports; soliciting and responding to public comments; draft decision of approval or rejection; an objection and objection resolution period (ended 9/23/2019), and then a final decision. Approximately 225 comments (75%+ opposed) were submitted on the public notice and scoping; 70 comments on the Draft Environmental Assessment; and 30 objections to the Draft Decision for Approval. The Forest Service has now issued its final Decision and Finding of No Significant Impact authorizing the project.

Georgia ForestWatch continues to strongly oppose a target range located one mile from the Appalachian Trail (directly down range), one-half mile from the Brasstown and Mark Trail Wilderness Areas, and adjacent to the Brasstown-Russell Scenic Byway. The proposed range is less than 3.5 miles from the existing under-capacity Chatuge Gun Range, also located on USFS lands.

Photo credit: Don Davis

Shooting range site with Appalachian Trail along the ridgeline

ForestWatch conducted a test that indicates that the constant noise generated by the shooting range, from dawn to dusk, will be heard by users of the Appalachian Trail hikers and campers in the two adjacent wilderness areas and by nearby residents. We recorded a decibel level of 78.5 on the Appalachian Trail, far exceeding the "annoyance" level of 55dB. The tests, noise modeling and other studies conducted as parts of the Environmental Assessment, report or project noise levels significantly less than those recorded by the GAFW. ForestWatch also has concerns about errant bullets, lead contamination, and increased siltation of adjacent streams. The environmental documents have been disappointing in the lack of comprehensiveness and inaccuracy of the analysis and conclusions. Significant questions have been asked and deficiencies pointed out to the USFS, but these things have not been addressed. This unnecessary proposal has the potential for significant permanent adverse impacts to the unique qualities of the Chattahoochee National Forest.

ForestWatch appreciates and supports the legitimate need for a shooting range (many of our members are hunters and shooters), but there is already a target range 3.5 miles away in Towns County. We believe there are far more suitable locations for such a facility and have asked Union County and the USFS to identify and evaluate other potential locations. Georgia ForestWatch, and our allies (Georgia Sierra Club, Georgia Appalachian Trail Club and others) will continue to oppose this project. You may view the project documents, comments, responses and objections to form your own opinion at https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=54559. ■

East Nottely Project – Seven years later

by Jess Riddle : Executive Director

If each Forest Service project worked exactly as described, some of ForestWatch's concerns would simply go away. Forests are complicated though, and the future is always less predictable than it seems. So as I walked with a group of ForestWatchers down a gated road into the East Nottely Project, we weren't sure what we would find.

The Blue Ridge Ranger District approved the project late 2011, planning many different actions including: 1,071 acres of forest thinning, 25 acres of more intense regeneration harvests, prescribed burning the entire 1,839-acre project area, planting grasses in wildlife openings, controlling invasive species, and closing and rehabilitating 2.5 miles of unauthorized roads. The District promised these actions would "contribute to improving forest health, restoring and maintaining native pine-hardwood forest and oak and oak-pine forest, and improving wildlife habitat, while controlling non-native plant species, improving watershed conditions, and managing forest visitor access." Georgia ForestWatch expressed concern that the fires would kill desirable species back to the ground and that those wildlife openings would quickly revert to undesirable species. Our greatest concern focused on the 728 acres of thinnings where whole trees would be removed, including branches and buds, which would rob the forests of needed nutrients and organic matter and damage long-term forest productivity and health.

The road we walked followed a broad ridge through a mix of young stands, where the Forest Service had not done any recent work, then more mature stands that the Forest Service had opened up by taking out about half the trees, leaving mostly oaks and cutting mostly white

(continued on page 11)

Photo credit: Jess Riddle

Blackberries cover a site the Forest Service has cut and burned to prepare for planting oaks and shortleaf pine.

Selling our forest lands

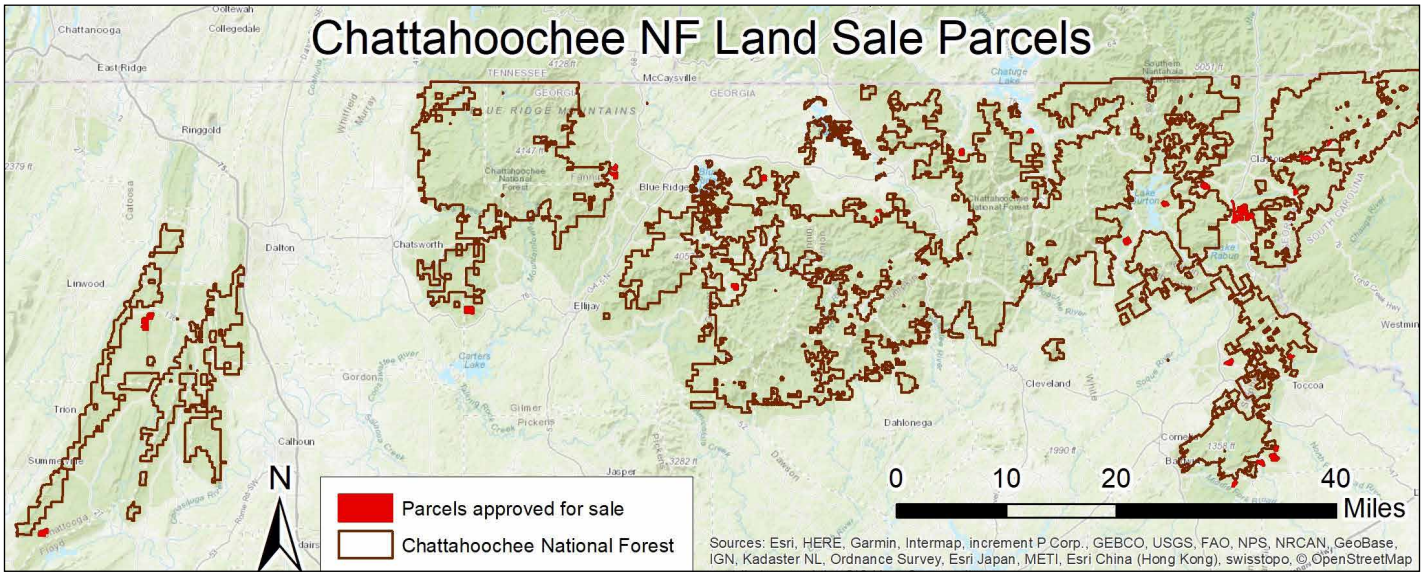
by Marie Dunkle : Board President

In December of 2018 the "Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018," colloquially known as the "Farm Bill," was passed into law by the U.S. Congress. A section of that Public Law entitled "Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest Land Adjustment" allows the USFS to sell isolated tracts of Georgia National Forest land that are disconnected from core lands. When this legislation was proposed by Representative Doug Collins in 2015, Georgia ForestWatch took a neutral position with the understanding that the tracts of land selected for sale would be ones that are disconnected from core Forest lands (i.e. surrounded by private land) and that present Forest access issues for Forest Service (FS) management as well as public recreation users of the Forest. Importantly, we also understood that the law would require the FS to retain proceeds from the sales to acquire higher-value conservation, timber and recreational lands in Georgia.

The 2018 Law authorizes sale of 30 specific tracts covering 3,841 acres of National Forest across the State of Georgia. The size of these land tracts range from 30 acres to over 800 acres. We recently learned that as early as 2011, the FS began meeting with county commissions in north Georgia to get buy-in on the specific land tracts to be sold. This year the FS established a working group to move forward with the Act. Members of this working group include the FS, Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, Georgia Forestry Commission and the Georgia Department of National Resources.

Georgia ForestWatch representatives, along with representatives of the Chattooga Conservancy and Rabun Trout Unlimited, recently met with CONF Supervisor Betty Jewett to learn about plans and processes for these land sales and acquisitions. Supervisor Jewett made it clear that she will manage all aspects of the land sale process and is the final, sole decision-maker on whether or not to sell any or all of the 30 tracts designated. She explained that the land sale will proceed according to procedures in the Forest Service Handbook, section 1909, and although "National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements will be met," NEPA applicability is limited. The discovery process for each land tract, according to Jewett, will consist of environmental review, including archeological, botanical and biological assessments, and hazardous waste and property line surveys by FS contractors. Supervisor Jewett referred to the process to be followed as "Environmental Due Diligence" and said that their analysis will be shared with working group partners and included in the public notice and comment period for the land sales. According to the FS, the discovery process with regard to the potential sales has not yet started and no land buyers have been identified. Land sales under this Act will be a multi-year process, and the Forest Supervisor expects to engage brokers to support a bidding process for land tract sales; or another real estate sale process may be used.

Following sale of lands, the FS will use sale dollars to purchase other land in Georgia, not necessarily land in the county where National Forest land was sold. The Law also allows for the option of land exchange instead of sale. Although the FS has a list of possible land



Chattahoochee National Forest land parcels authorized for sale

tracts for purchase or exchange, no action has taken place, nor is action on purchases expected for about two years, according to Jewett.

Jewett is directing those with specific land interests to their FS District Ranger; this includes those with suggestions for exchanges and lands to purchase as well as environmental concerns about any of the 30 designated land tracts.

Where Georgia ForestWatch Stands

With an open mind, ForestWatch sees some positive aspects in the authorized land sales under the 2018 Farm Bill. We recognize that where small isolated Forest tracts are disconnected from core lands, there is opportunity for the FS to purchase or exchange better parcels that can be managed, used and protected. Also, proceeds from some of these land sales may allow the FS to leverage other funds to obtain larger/more valuable tracts. For example, the sale proceeds can be combined with foundation grants to other partners who are completing restoration work.

However, the land sales also leave us concerned. On a National level, we observe efforts to sell off public lands elsewhere, and we are concerned about the precedent that the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest land sales may present here in Georgia. The arrangements and selection of land tracts for sale under the 2018 Farm Bill began at least seven years ago, and we wonder what other plans or deals may already be informally in process.

Join our new ForestRoots Coalition!

For a third of a century, Georgia ForestWatch has pursued our mission to preserve, protect, and restore the Chattahoochee-Ocoee National Forest and our organization has continued to evolve and grow. GAFW has been pushing back against the gathering storm clouds, but matching the scale of the issues and the political pressure will require allies and informed advocates. With the release of the Foothills environmental assessment and public meetings imminent, now is the time for those who care about our mountain landscape to come together. We need your active participation! To receive notices of training workshops and ongoing developments, please take a moment to sign up as a ForestRoots advocate at www.gafw.org/forestroots.

Vigilance is critical, especially in light of potential changes in NEPA that could further limit our public voice regarding future efforts to sell off National Forest lands.

We are also concerned that some of the 30 designated tracts may not be so "disconnected," and some may still have significant ecological value. Although the FS will do their own in-house environmental review for each sale, ForestWatch plans to review all tracts in the field and submit information to the FS prior to decisions. By surveying the tracts, we will be able to form our own assessment about value, potential watershed issues, environmental conditions, wildlife corridors, and rare species – with a science-based perspective. We look forward to working with allied organizations and engaging ForestWatch volunteers in this endeavor. The FS invites members of the public to visit their Ranger District Offices and review their maps with details on the designated land tracts. ■

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS! (July – September)

Johnny & Rhonda Bailey
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Jan & Dennis Stansell
Sweetgrass Foundation
Lloyd & Bonnie Unnold
Jim & Patricia Walker

Another fun Fall Retreat

by Sue Harmon : Board Past President

More than 90 ForestWatchers attended this year's Fall Retreat, coming together to stay abreast of current management issues in the Chattahoochee Oconee National Forest and to have a good time while doing it! Fellowship, inspiration, and good food alongside the beautiful Lake Trahlyta at Vogel State Park made for an event that helped keep us all educated and motivated to continue our work to preserve, protect, and restore this forest that we love.

If you couldn't make it this year, we hope you'll consider joining us next year. Save the date: October 10, 2020, and check with our office about accommodation options. Consider making a weekend of it, so you can join the Friday evening potluck and the Saturday evening campfire and music.

Highlights from this year include:

- A big picture review of current forest issues by our Executive Director, Jess Riddle
- Two informative presentations by our partners at Southern Environmental Law Center
- Four panelists sharing their environmental advocacy work
- Memorable role playing when Jess morphed into a Forest Service Ranger just by the change of a hat!
- BBQ slow cooked on site
- Delicious crock pot entrees donated by numerous volunteers
- A choice of three afternoon naturalist outings or a film screening of *Burned: Are Trees the New Coal?*
- Saturday evening live music around the campfire
- Raffle and silent auction prizes – some great bargains were had – that's for sure!

Photo credit: Andrew Linker

Anne Heikkila roleplaying with Jess.

We thanked all the many Retreat volunteers by name in a recent email alert – over half of those in attendance helped in one way or another! Yes, volunteers are the heart of this organization and without them, this retreat would not have happened.

We would now like to take this opportunity to thank once more all the sponsors and contributors, who donated upfront help make this event happen:

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Photo credit: Sue Harmon

Lots to do in the kitchen!
L to R: Donna Born, Jeanette Crawford, Jane Lipscomb

The Fall Retreat provides opportunities for both formal learning and informal networking.

Photo credit: Sue Harmon

Panel of experts including Tally Sweat, Anne Heikkila, Vicki Weeks, and Mike Worley, with Board President Marie Dunkle moderating

Join us next year at Vogel!

October 9-11, 2020

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Donor spotlight: Patty Lowe

by Janice Eaton : Development Director

Backpacking the Appalachian Trail, flying in a private plane, or globetrotting, Patricia Lowe has adventured in more places than many can dream of. With a B.S. in Nursing and Masters in Public Health, Patty served as a U.S. Army Reserves Lieutenant Colonel and as Director of Public Health Nursing in Metro Atlanta. She still lives with cairn terrier Dolly in the Sautee-Nacoochee cabin she shared with Roy, her late husband of 43 years, and her memories are vivid.

Patty has hiked, backpacked, boated, and/or canoed in Siberia, Iceland, and Portugal; the Italian, German, and Swiss Alps; Spain's Camino del Santiago; Scotland's West Highland Way; Alaska's Brooke Range; national parks in Utah, Idaho, and Washington; and the AT. She visited Nunavut, seat of the Canadian Inuit, and followed Antartica explorer Ernest Shackleton's path. She laughs at some of her earlier, bolder adventures--getting trapped in a washout of an ancient Maui trail and discovering that a trail on Molokai was a feral hog run.

"As I got smarter, I got more leery," she says. But one adventure is a caution for all hikers. Fly fisherman Roy frequently dropped her off at trailheads, so she could hike while he fished. In Wyoming's Medicine Bow wilderness, Patty took off on a day hike while Roy departed for a lake. But the faint trail disappeared and Patty relied on her compass.

"There were no cellphones in those days. I should have turned around but kept going," Patty said. After circling, finding nothing, she headed for cairns on the Continental Divide, hoping to spot the lake where Roy was and bushwhack to it. The day was getting cold. Contemplating sheltering under leaf litter overnight, Patty spotted two men in Forest Service uniforms. They gave her a ride all the way to the lake – where a frantic Roy and search party were getting ready to search for her.

Patty got involved with Georgia ForestWatch through Friends of the Mountains, a group that became part of GAFW in early days. Elmer Butler and Marie Mellinger were influential, and she visited gardens with her late friend and GAFW supporter Maureen Donohue. Patty still hikes with GAFW, mindful of limits to her stamina as her eighth decade approaches. But getting outdoors and yoga keep her fit.

Photo credit: Janice Eaton

At Sautee-Nacoochee Community Association, about to yank up some invasive Japanese stiltgrass.

Over the years, Patty has directed the bulk of her giving to GAFW via very generous responses to Appeals and special event sponsorships like the Wild & Woolly Festival. Why does she continue to give?

"Pressures are growing on our national forests. I support GAFW's mission to preserve, protect, and restore the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest and I like the leadership position that ForestWatch is taking to protect our mountain treasures," said Patty. "I also appreciate GAFW leaders' thoughtfulness and expertise, and how they network with other organizations."

GAFW is grateful for Patty's support. To learn about our legacy giving program, visit GAFW.org/planned-giving, call (706) 867-0051, or email Executive Director Jess Riddle at jriddle@gafw.org. ■

East Nottely Project – Seven Years Later

(continued from page 5)

pines. The skid trails, where machines hauled trees through the woods to log landings, consistently showed very little soil damage with 100% leaf litter cover and abundant pine seedlings. The log landings themselves were typical, flat areas denuded of upper soil horizons and covered with Virginia pine seedlings, one of the few trees that establishes well on such degraded soil.

Tree seedlings sprouted up in logged areas. A few oaks, which the Forest Service is trying to regenerate, reached head high, but they were far outnumbered by Virginia pine and especially white pine, two species the Forest Service is trying to keep from reproducing. The pines could be killed by prescribed fire, but after seven years the Forest Service still has not burned the part we visited. The younger stands where they had planned whole tree harvests have not been touched, making ForestWatch's greatest concerns moot.

The unauthorized road we checked next ran down to the lake shore. The guard-rail segment installed across the entrance blocks cars, but ATVs had found a way around. We saw no evidence of "rehabilitation" of the road. The nearby wildlife opening that had been covered in kudzu is now vine-free. Instead of the grasses described in the project plans, we found a thicket of blackberries, which is better wildlife habitat in some ways.

At our last stop, homes were nestled in the woods, and across the black-top, a wide-open slope dipped gently away. The Forest Service had cut about 90% of the trees, as promised, leaving mostly oaks. The subsequent site-prep burn, a hot fire intended to control competing vegetation to allow planted seedlings to grow freely, had killed almost all the trees spared in the harvest. Red-headed woodpeckers flew between snags, passing over blackberries and goldenrods, but not planted shortleaf pine or oak seedlings. The Forest Service still plans to plant seedlings. It is hard to see the cut and burned tract as "improving forest health."

Overall, the project appears to be on a path towards neither the Forest Service's vision nor our fears. On the positive side, the timber harvests we saw had low impact on soils, and the road closures and invasive species control help native species. On the negative side, the site-prep burn killed most trees retained in the regeneration harvest, and non-logging actions generally have not been implemented. We also noticed several post oaks and a few blackjack oaks, species uncommon on the Forest that suggest the project's ridgetops were suitable for woodland restoration, a Forest Service goal. The Blue Ridge Ranger District has had difficulty choosing appropriate sites for woodland restoration, so this project seems like a missed opportunity. Going forward, the current state of follow-through on this project raises serious questions about whether the Forest Service is capable of implementing a far larger project, which is what they are proposing with the Foothills Landscape Project. ■

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JOIN NOW! Complete this form and mail to:
Georgia ForestWatch, 81 Crown Mountain Pl., Building C, Suite 200, Dahlonega, GA 30533
Join online at **www.gafw.org/membership/** or call 706-867-0051 to join via phone. Either way is paperless!

Georgia ForestWatch Membership Form

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

Phone: _____E-mail: _____

How did you hear about us? _____

Did you know a $2,500 President's Circle membership now entitles you to a half-day consultation with our Field Ecologist or other qualified GAFW volunteer to assess the condition of your forested property? Call GAFW for more info.

CHOOSE YOUR GIVING LEVEL

❑	$2,500	President's Circle
❑	$1,000	Benefactor
❑	$500	Forest Guardian
❑	$250	Supporter
❑	$100	Friend or Small Business
❑	$50	Family
❑	$35	Individual
❑	$20	Student
❑	$ _____	Other amount

PAYMENT INFORMATION

❑ Enclosed is cash or check payable to Georgia ForestWatch

❑ Charge my credit card: ❑ AMEX ❑ MasterCard ❑ VISA ❑ Discover

Signature: _____

Account Number: _____

Expiration Date:_____ CVV _____

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GEORGIA FORESTWATCH

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