GEORGIA FORESTWATCH
PRESERVE PROTECT RESTORE GAFW.ORG

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Photo: Debbie Martin. Taken at Whiteside Mountain in Highlands, NC, in October 2022.

Leatherwood Creek and Upper Middle Fork Landscape Management Project

Recently the Chattooga River Ranger District (CRRD) published a scoping notice for multiple projects on national forest lands in and around the **Lake Russell Wildlife Management Area**. Spanning just under 15,000 acres, the Forest Service (USFS) is proposing management actions with the goal of restoring native plant communities, improving watersheds, enhancing wildlife, and reducing fuels. Much of this property is recovering agricultural land and includes some residual pine plantation plantings with no ecological value that GAFW fully supports timbering and restoring to natural ecosystems.

The **scoping notification** was received by GAFW on January 18, 2023, with a submission date of February 19. During that time, GAFW Forest Ecologist Jess Riddle made two site visits to the proposed locations to conduct a thorough analysis of the project and authored a well-documented data-rich narrative used by **GAFW in our submission to the USFS**. Additionally, GAFW worked with partner **SELC** to draft additional insight into the Land Adjustment Parcels questions raised by this project. If you will recall, in the 2018 Farm Bill, thirty tracts of national forest lands in Georgia were identified as “inefficient to manage or have lost their principal value” and allowed for sale. Known as the **Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest Land Adjustment Act**, it authorized but did not require the thirty tracts to be sold. Almost five years later, none have been offered for sale, and this project proposes thinning,

clearcutting, and prescribed fire on many of the tracts located within the boundaries of this proposal. This raises the question of why we are using limited public resources to invest in these parcels if they are slated to be sold. Would not those resources be better used in other areas of the forest or let the public know that the USFS does not intend to sell these properties after all?

As with all multi-faceted proposals, the impacts are complex. While GAFW supports many of the actions proposed in this project, such as thinning loblolly pine plantations, controlled burns, culvert replacements, and outplanting rare species, we are also concerned that some actions could have unintended effects. Clearcutting mature shortleaf pine would be counterproductive, and invasive princess trees could become a major problem when repeated fires eventually expose mineral soil.

Finally, GAFW considers sedimentation from poorly constructed and unmaintained unpaved roads within the CONF to be a significant concern, and the limited resources of the USFS should be prioritized in addressing road and trail maintenance in this project and throughout the forest.

GA General Assembly Update

GAFW attended the **Georgia Water Coalition's** (GWC) Capitol Conservation Day last week and met with state legislators to discuss the most important bills pending before this year's session. After the morning informational session and group photo, attendees dispersed to meet with their district representatives, key committee members, and leadership. Most meetings were well received, and broad support for GWC and GAFW priority bills was prominently visible.

As always, GAFW is looking out for the best interests of our national forest lands and other bills that affect our state's environment. GAFW encourages you to reach out to your state legislators and voice your input on the following bills.

· **SB 78** - Off-Road Vehicles; civil forfeiture of any off-road vehicle operated while fleeing police or driving aggressively; authorize

Background - This bill increases penalties for the unauthorized and illegal use of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and other off-highway vehicles (OHVs). When used in violation of the law, such as tearing up roads and trails within our national forests, this bill allows law enforcement to impound the vehicle until all fees and fines are paid. The increased penalty of having the vehicle impounded gives teeth to the current law that only allows for low-dollar tickets to be issued and the offender to

drive off and continue their destructive behavior.
Status – Passed the **Senate Committee on Public Safety** on 2/22/23. You can **view the hearing here** starting at 49:41. Next step is to pass through the **Senate Rules Committee**.
Recommendation – **Support.** Contact **your Senator** and Chair of the Senate Rules Committee, **Senator Matt Brass**, to ask for passage to the Senate floor for a vote.

· **HB 71** - Okefenokee Protection Act; enact
Background – This bill prevents future attempts to undermine this extraordinary and uncommon national treasure by prohibiting future mining permits on a vulnerable sand ridge that forms the Eastern boundary of the Okefenokee Swamp.
Status – Currently stalled in the **House Natural Resources and Environment Committee**.
Recommendation – **Support.** Contact **your Representative** and **Committee Chair Representative, Lynn Smith**, to ask for passage out of the committee. You can also use **this action alert from Protect Georgia**.

· **HB 477** - Agriculture; require certain notices for application of soil amendments to land with certain requirements
Background – If you live anywhere in rural, or even exurban, Georgia, you may notice the lingering stench coming off agricultural fields during part of the year. This is due to untreated industrial waste from chicken production (eggs, chicks, birds, & meat packing facilities) and other animal by-products, such as pet food refuse, being dumped on fields as a "soil amendment." Allowing untreated animal waste to be spread across our landside without regulation creates odors, swarms of flies and vultures, and ecological disaster in neighboring and downstream waterways from runoff (ask the growing number of people who refuse to swim in Lake Lanier anymore). This bill will create a public database of all "soil amendments" spread on fields and allow local governments to investigate the source of this pollution and enforce existing rules.
Status – Recently introduced and assigned to the **House Natural Resources and Environment Committee**.
Recommendation – **Support.** Contact **your Representative** and **Committee Chair Representative, Lynn Smith,** to ask for passage out of the committee. If you have examples of how this concern directly affects you, please use them in your communications to strengthen your case.

· **HB 189** - Highways, bridges, and ferries; allowable variance for weight limitations upon a vehicle or load; provide for
Background – The only thing worse than having to back down a mountain road due to an oncoming logging truck bearing down on you is an even heavier logging truck bearing down on you while you try to find a pullout. This bill would, unfortunately, raise weight limits from 80,000 pounds to 90,000 pounds for all five-axle big rigs. The weight restriction on federal roads and bridges is set at 80,000 pounds, meaning that our heaviest trucks will be forced onto state and local surface roads, creating safety concerns and increased wear. If you are already dealing with poorly maintained roads and deferred maintenance on bridges in your county, this will dramatically increase the number of potholes without providing any additional taxes from truckers to repair their damage to your streets.
Status – After some ups and downs, the bill is currently assigned to the **House Transportation Committee**.
Recommendation – **Oppose.** Contact **your Representative** and **Committee Chair Representative, Rick Jasperse** (to those of you who live in Big Canoe and Jasper, your voice is especially needed), to share your opposition to this bill. You

should also reach out to your local city and county officials, letting them know you oppose this bill and asking them also to contact state legislators.

Have more questions about what these bills will do and the legislative process? Join the Georgia Water Coalition virtually on Thursday, March 2, between 6 and 7 pm to hear timely updates on GWC priority legislation and ask questions about the next steps.
Login to the March 2 Legislative Virtual Meeting
Join Zoom Meeting
https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81398143310
Meeting ID: 813 9814 3310
One tap mobile
+16468769923,,81398143310# US (New York)
+16469313860,,81398143310# US

Calling All Federal Employees & Active Military

Georgia ForestWatch has an opportunity to join the Combined Federal Campaign, the federal government's employee giving program. This program allows eligible employees to make donations to charities as a tax-deductible payroll deduction. Before GAFW applies to join this campaign, we want to gauge interest among our supporters. If you're a federal employee or military personnel who is interested in supporting GAFW this way, please reply to **donations@gafw.org** and let us know. Thanks in advance for your support.

Donate to GAFW Today

Upcoming GAFW Outings

Thursday, March 9 - Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests' Blue Ridge Ranger District Open House, Blairsville, GA. 4:30 pm.

Saturday, April 8 - Private Hike & Tour - **Lula Lake Land Trust with Debbie**, Lookout Mountain, GA. 11:00 am.

Thursday, April 27 - **Keown Falls & Johns Mountain with Bill & Leslie,** NW GA, near Resaca, GA. 10:00 am.

Saturday, May 6 - **Cooper's Creek-Old Growth "Valley of the Giants" with Melanie & Cliff**, 10:00 am.

Saturday, October 14 - Save the Date! GAFW Annual Retreat at Red Top Mountain.

Interested in leading a hike or other outing for GAFW? We are searching for additional leaders who are willing to share their favorite parts of the forest. Let us know at **outreach@gafw.org**.

GAFW Outings on Meetup

If this email was forwarded to you, **please register here** to receive GAFW updates.

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Thank You

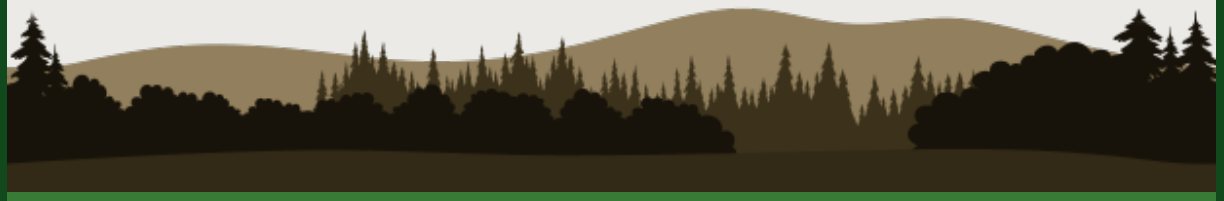
Georgia ForestWatch is the only nonprofit organization with a mission solely dedicated to ensuring the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests remain healthy and available for future generations, and we can only pursue our mission with the support of the community.

Please support our mission by ensuring your **membership is up to date** and providing **additional support** as you are able.

On behalf of our entire national forests in our beautiful state, we thank you for your support.

Our Mission

Our mission is to enhance the health of over 867,000 acres of Georgia's national forest by protecting our forests and streams, advocating for natural processes, and identifying opportunities to improve forest management. Visit **Georgia ForestWatch** (GAFW) to learn more.



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Georgia Forestwatch | 81 Crown Mtn Place, Building C, Suite 200, Dahlonega, GA 30533

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