



Nantahala and Pisgah NFs Wilderness Evaluation Process

October 2016

Process steps

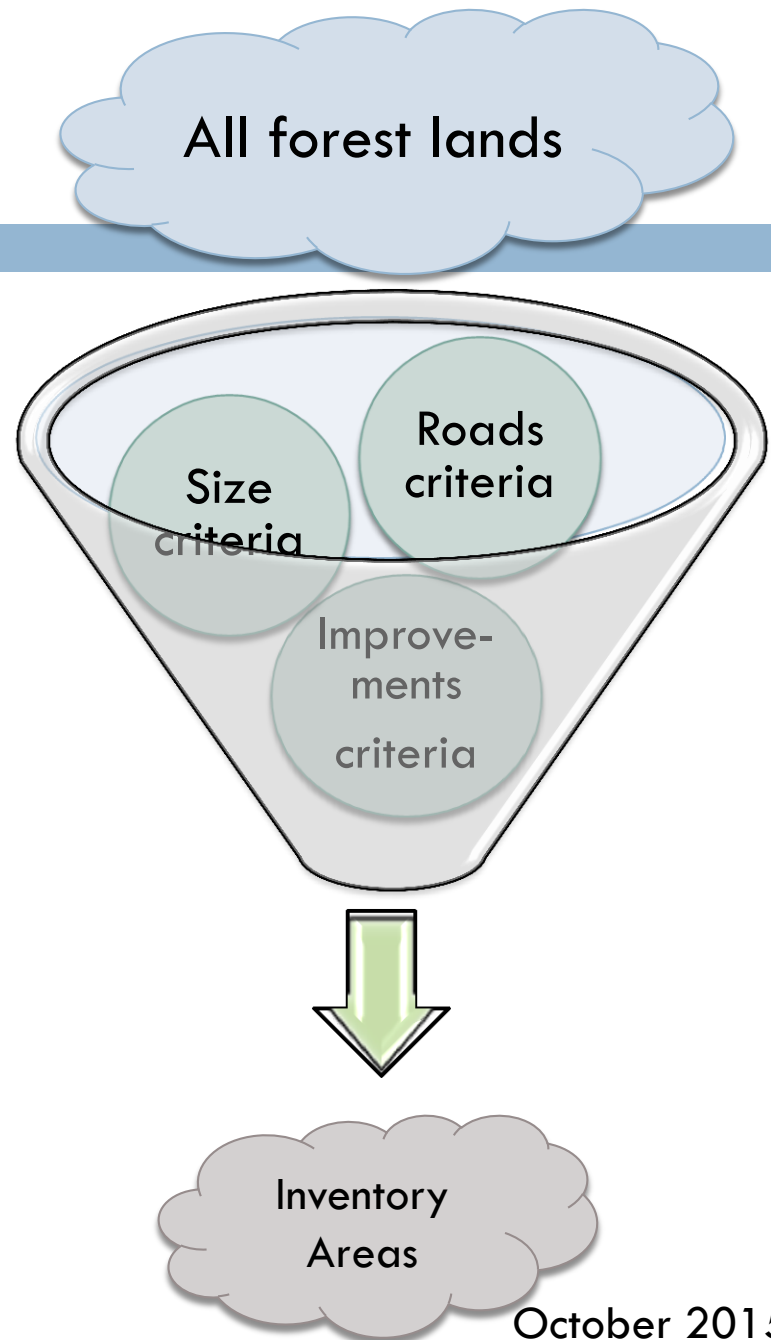
- Identifying and evaluating lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System consists of 4 primary steps:

1. Inventory
2. Evaluation
3. Analysis
4. Recommendation

- *Each step requires public participation & documentation.*


Step 1: Inventory

- Identify and create an inventory of all lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.
- Inclusion in the inventory is not a designation that conveys or requires a particular kind of management.




Step 2. Evaluation

- In Fall 2015, the Forest published the complete inventory, including an explanation of the inventory process and asked for feedback on the evaluation considerations
- Provided blank evaluation forms to fill out
- Asked for public input by December 15, 2015



Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests

Evaluation Criteria and Comment Form for Areas That May Be Suitable for Inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System



The Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests in the process of revising the forest plan. A required part of the revision process includes identifying and evaluating lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and determining whether to recommend any such lands for wilderness designation. A description of this process can be found in the 2012 Forest Service Planning Rule and Chapter 70 of the Forest Service Land Management Planning Handbook 1909.12. This process includes the following four steps:

1. Identify and inventory all lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System
2. Evaluate the wilderness characteristics of each area based on a given set of criteria
3. Determine which areas to further analyze in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process
4. Decide which areas, if any, to recommend for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS).

To complete the second step, the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Plan revision team developed the following questions to gather information related to each of the five criteria for wilderness characteristics listed in FSH 1909.12, Chapter 70 - Wilderness. Responses to these questions from planning team members, other national forest staff, and interested members of the public will be used to evaluate areas that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Area Name:

Criterion 1- Apparent Naturalness: The degree to which an area generally appears to be affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprints of man's work substantially unnoticeable.

Considerations	Narrative
<p>1a) <u>Within</u> the area, do ecological conditions appear natural or to be noticeably modified by human intervention? Describe the natural appearance of the area. Consider the composition of plant and animal communities, water, and soil.</p>	
<p>1b) Describe deviations from the natural condition and the extent to which they occur, including evidence of past management activities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Are</u> vegetation management, timber harvest, or restoration treatments substantially noticeable? Describe the type and extent of vegetation management activities and associated 	

Step 2. Evaluation

- Evaluate the wilderness characteristics of all lands in the inventory.
 - Apparent naturalness
 - Outstanding opportunities for solitude OR for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation
 - Ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value
 - Manageability to preserve its wilderness characteristics

What we heard from the public

Winter 2015/16 – This time last year

- We received hundreds of comments, most of which were received electronically
- Multiple Form letters
 - ▣ Support for the National Recreation Areas and wilderness areas included in the MOU
 - ▣ Big Ivy should be recommended as wilderness
 - ▣ Mountain biking areas that are important to maintain
 - ▣ Protection of all 52 inventoried areas
- County resolutions in opposition to any wilderness recommendations



Incorporation of Public Comments into Evaluation Report

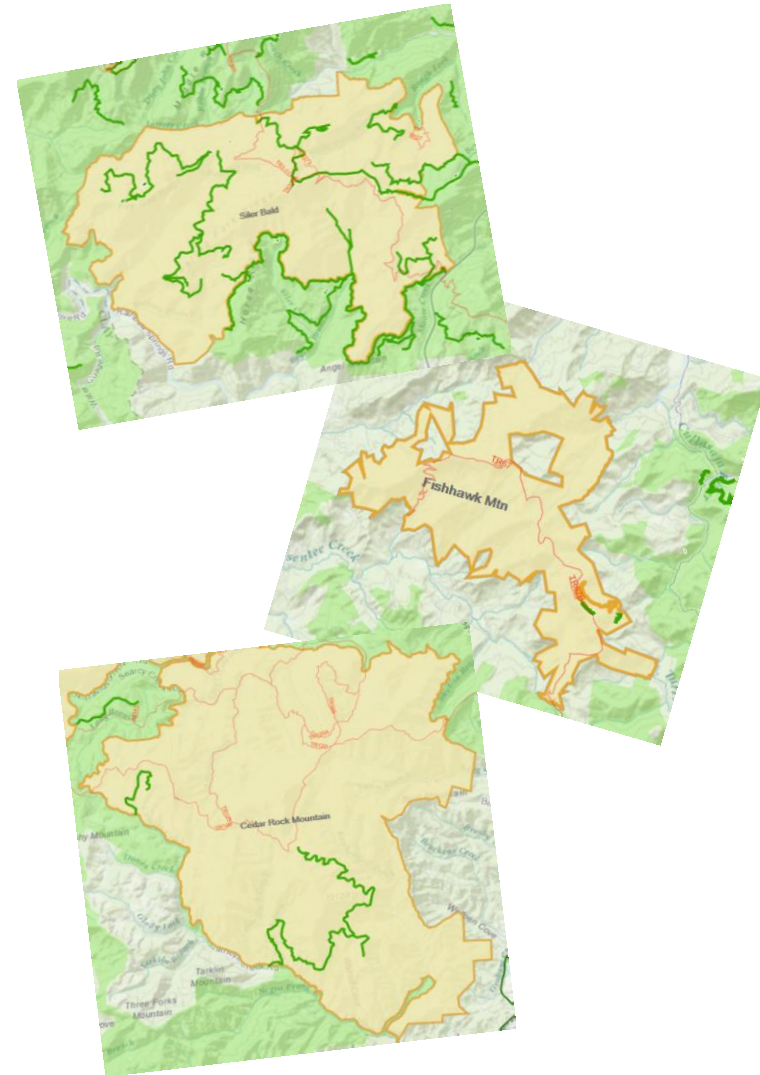
- A team of individuals was assigned to completing the evaluation narratives for the 52 inventory areas
 - ▣ Involved the Regional Wilderness Coordinator, Regional Planner and National Wilderness Director
- GIS analysis was completed to quantify spatial data for each of the 52 areas
- Google Earth imagery as well as local district knowledge was incorporated into evaluations
- All public comments were reviewed and incorporated into the evaluation where appropriate
 - ▣ Some public comments are more appropriately addressed during the analysis

Evaluation Report

- Individual area evaluations were reviewed for consistency in how the criteria were applied, and reviewed by district employees for place based accuracy
- Conclusion statements on the overall wilderness character of each area were included as a way of summarizing the evaluation findings
- The Evaluation Report, including a process report, was made available to the public at the end of July 2016

Areas identified as not having high quality wilderness characteristics

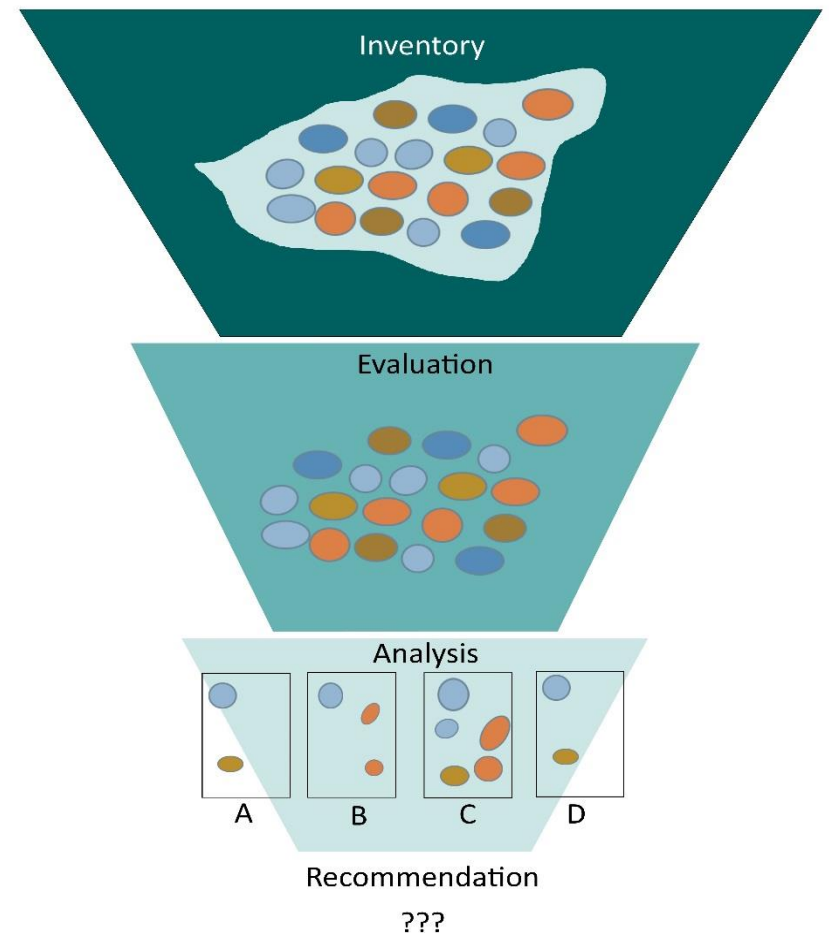
- Impacts to naturalness
 - ▣ high concentrations of ML1 and ML2 (closed) roads
 - ▣ high concentrations of vegetation management in the last 20 years
 - ▣ high concentrations of maintained wildlife fields
- Irregular or convoluted boundaries that would make managing for wilderness characteristics difficult
- Impacts to solitude or primitive recreation
 - ▣ High concentration of recreation users
 - ▣ Heavy use by outfitter and guides



Moving from Evaluation to Analysis

- In an effort to move forward with the management area mapping meetings (planned for August), and the conversation on recommending areas for wilderness, the FS also provided an *initial range of alternatives for wilderness recommendations* for public feedback

Wilderness Inventory, Evaluation, and Recommendation Process



Inclusion in the alternatives is at the discretion of the Responsible Official

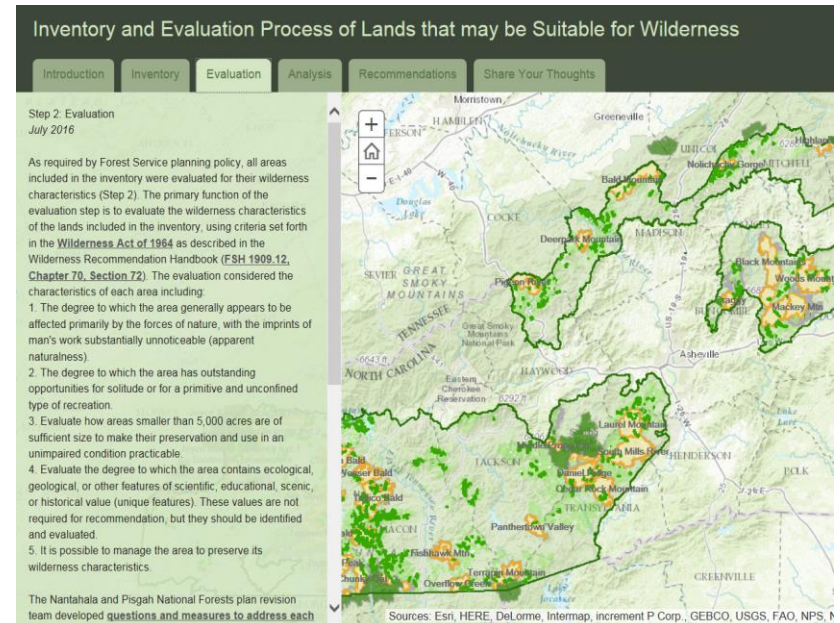
Decision should be informed by:

- the design of alternatives
- the information from the evaluation of wilderness characteristics, and
- information from the public during the public engagement process.



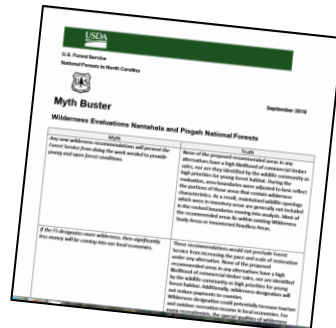
Moving towards development of alternatives

- FS shared a proposed range of alternatives for wilderness recommendation - “Initial Areas Proposed for Analysis”
- FS asked for public feedback prior to sharing the plan alternatives for the DEIS



Open House Meetings

- ❑ Six open houses were held at each of the Ranger Districts in September and October
- ❑ Meetings were not exclusively about wilderness, instead covered all district activities and FPR
- ❑ The majority of meeting attendees came to talk about wilderness evaluations and ask questions



Public Feedback on Evaluation

July 25th
to
mid - Oct

- Hundreds of comments were received on the evaluation and initial areas in alts.
- We heard from the following organizations:
 - ▣ *American Whitewater, IMBA, Friends of Big Ivy, Chattooga Conservancy, Friends of Harper Creek and Lost Cove Wilderness, Chattooga Conservancy, Georgia Forest Watch, Ruffed Grouse Society, TWS, Mountain True, Carolina Mtn Club, Nantahala Hiking Club, SELC*
- *Also heard from counties through conversations with district staff, meetings with Congressman Meadows Office, and additional resolutions*

Public Feedback on Evaluation

- Majority of area-specific comments were on three areas
 - Big Ivy
 - Terrapin Mtn
 - Overflow WSA



Public Feedback on Evaluation Process

- Some were comfortable with the evaluation process and results
- Others felt the evaluation fell short because:
 - ▣ The evaluation did not appropriately consider management of adjacent lands
 - ▣ Current uses (i.e. wildlife fields and heavy recreation use) should not influence potential wilderness management
 - ▣ Not all of the unique qualities of the areas were recognized in the evaluation report, and underrepresented ecosystems were not considered
 - ▣ Conclusions about overall wilderness characteristics should not have been included in the evaluation

Public Feedback on Initial Alternatives

- Some appreciated the initial range of alternatives and felt it was reasonable
- Others felt, the initial alternatives were problematic because:
 - ▣ The range of alternatives is too conservative
 - ▣ There is no alternative that considers a non-recommendation for Lost Cove and Harper Creek
 - ▣ Alternatives should reflect the full range of public opinion, and be correspondingly broad
 - ▣ The range of wilderness recommendations should not have been presented outside the context of the rest of the alternative components

Next Steps on Wilderness Evaluation and Analysis

