

Forest Service Deep Dive #2 – Recreation and Access
March 10, 2020
Question and Answer

Q: Was there consideration of expanding Interface to a broader range of linear recreation corridors like popular rivers, trails, and reservoir shores?

A: There was a lot of conversation around Interface and its role, resulting in a lot of changes since our pre-drafts of 2017. We decided to focus on areas of heavy public use and where the public has its first interaction with the Forest Service. We mapped shorelines and reservoirs, but these include many areas that are not heavily used. Many popular rivers among recreation users are addressed in the Wild and Scenic River sections of the plan. In the end, we settled on our current framework with 250ft around heavily used routes, including national trails.

Q: Why are there not ambitious Tier 2 goals for trail maintenance and recreation infrastructure more generally, to account for potential capacity increases?

A: Tier 1 is 50% of trails maintained to standard and Tier 2 is 60%. These numbers came from conversations with district rangers and other leadership. We feel these goals are reasonable and attainable. If we are able to accomplish more through partnerships, grants or other means, then the Tier 2 goals could be exceeded.

Q: Where are the impacts discussed of restricting horses & bikes to designated trails in view of consolidating use (at rough estimates, 1/3 of the currently used trails for the Grandfather) i.e. degradation of system trails and user conflict when users are concentrated on much fewer miles?

A: The effects of restricting horses and bikes to designated trails are discussed in the DEIS pages 428 to 432. Under Forest Service policy, unauthorized trails cannot be maintained, even if there is capacity to do so. The idea behind restricting horses and bikes to designated trails is to focus use on system trails where maintenance can be done to create sustainable trails and reduce ecological impact. If unauthorized trails are in sustainable locations, they could be considered for addition to the trail system with an appropriate level of analysis.

Q: Will there be an interim period before the closure in the "Unauthorized Trail" policy? so that these trails can be evaluated and in some cases brought into the authorized system?

A: Discussions are underway with representatives from the equestrian and mountain bike communities to identify an implementation strategy that could incorporate phased in approach. Ideas are under development that include monitoring, an objective, and/or a revised standard in the proposed Plan, and the final strategy may be shaped further by public input received during this comment period.

Q: How different are new trail standards from the current plan?

A: The current plan does not include language around sustainable recreation. The draft plan is different in that all standards, goals, objectives, and desired conditions are framed around the three elements of sustainable recreation – ecological, social, and economic – which is a national goal. This sets the stage for moving towards sustainable recreation. The DEIS has lot of information about how the trail standards differ from the current plan, and the effects of this changed language on pages 428 to 435.

Q: Given that all action alternatives require new trail proposals to be collaborative & sustainable, why additionally exclude new horse trails in Wilderness? See pg 264, Wilderness standard number 5, "Do not expand existing network of equestrian trails."

A: Equestrian use is not prohibited in Wilderness and there are horse trails in designated areas. The standard to not expand equestrian trails in wilderness comes from concerns of increased impacts of equestrian use and that maintenance of equestrian trails often requires machines, which are not allowed in Wilderness. On the Nantahala & Pisgah NF, there are deep organic soils and high annual rainfall, which requires more frequent tread maintenance. Failing to perform tread maintenance on equestrian trails at needed frequencies could impact Wilderness values. Changing or eliminating the proposed standard will be considered.

Q: What are recreation residence tracts mentioned in LSU-S-08?

A: These refer to small vacation cabins dispersed through the Nantahala & Pisgah where private citizens can vacation under special permits. There are 17 or 18 across the forest.

Q: How does the Forest manage for sustainability and access to non-system, non-designated places, such as boating access, fishing access along rivers, overlooks or waterfalls, or access to climbing areas? Are there successful erosion or other mitigation approaches for the kinds of uses above that are not covered by the trail guidelines in the draft?

A: Where there is off-trail use causing resource damage, the Forest Service is required to mitigate those impacts. This is a response to resource damage rather than maintenance for a recreation value. If unauthorized routes are in sustainable locations, they could be considered for addition to the trail system.

Q: Please explain the thought behind developing a special climbing management strategy as an objective versus detailing strategy details in the plan? What do you think you don't know yet, that you'd need to know in order to address during plan revision? Would a climbing strategy created after the plan hold less weight or be harder to change than including climbing direction as part of the plan?

A: The team felt that climbing is an important issue with many specific needs and considerations. Due to Plan revision timeline and planning team capacity, taking on a collaborative climbing strategy during Plan revision would not allow for the dedication and engagement warranted. Development of a climbing strategy outside the Plan revision process could allow more dedicated staff effort and be a collaborative endeavor drawing on local climber expertise. The climbing strategy collaboration could be similar to the Nantahala & Pisgah Trails Strategy process. Forest Service staff does not know what additional information it needs for the climbing strategy, but feels like a more in-depth process is necessary. If any portion of a climbing strategy requires a Plan amendment, or if the entire strategy is adopted or referenced as a Plan amendment, that will be considered at the time.

Q: How were fixed anchors considered for non-Wilderness management areas?

A: The plan is inherently permissive - if there are not prohibitions on an activity, then it is allowed. The climbing strategy could address the issue further or add management approaches, such as using camouflaged anchors. In the draft plan, there are no prohibitions on anchors in non-Wilderness areas.

Q: Recreational Settings P. 117: "Where trail use and climbing routes are impacting unique habitats, trails will be closed, relocated, or other protection measures will be implemented." Can this guidance include mention of collaboration, education, and site-specific intervention to mitigate or stop impact to unique habitats, particularly for climbing?

A: There is room for collaboratively coming up with solutions to impact issues. There are plan components to protect rare species, such as Peregrine falcons and rare plants in danger of being trampled. There are opportunities to collaborate with recreation groups to work towards common goals

to protect species and maintain quality recreation experiences. There is the possibility to add more language including conversations with partners.

Q: How do the recreation plan components ensure social and economic sustainability, and not just ecological sustainability?

A: There are desired conditions and goals associated with providing a range of recreation experiences or protecting special places. Not all plan direction for recreation is tied to objectives. Financial capability was a large focus of the Plan revision in order to provide a sustainable recreation program for social and economic benefits. This allows recreation opportunities to provide high quality recreation experiences. There are also objectives around collaboration working toward different facets of sustainability and visitor experience. For example, Objective 2 from the Community Connections section on increasing volunteer and service program effectiveness, Recreation Objective 1 about moving towards sustainability by improving visitor satisfaction, Recreation Objective 4 on creating further loop trails opportunities, and creating strategies for climbing, mineral collection, and forestwide access analysis. This is intended to improve social sustainability by involving user groups and meeting their needs of user satisfaction. Well maintained and sustainable recreation opportunities increase user satisfaction and ultimately provide economic benefits to local communities.

Q: Why doesn't the plan update boating direction the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River?

A: The Forest has not considered changes in plan direction for the Chattooga River, as that was identified early on in the plan revision process by the Forest Supervisor as outside the scope of this revision effort. In 2014, then Forest Supervisor Kristin Bail decided the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Plan revision would not revisit the issue of upper Chattooga River boating, because the required use monitoring had not begun. Her decision was supported by the Regional Forester. Initial analysis of the recently completed first round of monitoring may be insufficient to determine trends, impacts, and potentially needed changes to allowed use. As the lead river management unit, the Sumter National Forest will assess current and future monitoring results and make adaptive management decisions in coordination with the National Forests in North Carolina. If managed use changes, the Forest Plan will be amended accordingly.

Q: Why were the 2013 National Visitor Use Monitoring numbers used (pg 420 DEIS) when the 2018 numbers are available as of Aug 2019 (table 136).

A: The plan analysis is large and integrated, and the 2018 numbers became available after a bulk of the analysis was completed. Updating the DEIS would have impacted multiple sections of the plan, not just the recreation section. In order to not repeat analyses and get the draft plan and DEIS out, the 2013 numbers were used.

Q: What are the Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines referenced in REC - S-18?

A: The Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines (FSTAG) provides guidance for maximizing accessibility of trails in the National Forest System, while not changing the character or experience of the trail setting. The standard in the draft plan reiterates that we should follow the latest agency guidance on this topic, which is available to the public on the Washington Office website.

Q: Under the current plan it is a violation to ride a bicycle on trails not designated for that use - is that applicable only to system trails?

A: Yes. The current Forest-wide order on occupancy and use prohibits riding or possessing a bicycle on a developed trail not designated for that use.