

NANTAHALA & PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST

STAKEHOLDERS FORUM PROPOSAL

SEPTEMBER 1, 2017

Submitted by the following members and alternates of the Nantahala & Pisgah National Forest Stakeholders Forum:

David Whitmire - Fish & Wildlife Conservation Council
Jim Gray – Ruffed Grouse Society
Don Mallicoat – Ruffed Grouse Society
Susan Fletcher – Pisgah Hardwoods & Canton Sawmill
Gary Peters – NC state chapter, National Wild Turkey Federation
Chris Coxen – National Wild Turkey Federation
Gordon Warburton – Quality Deer Management Association
Fred Hardin – Gilkey Lumber Company
Jim Sitts – Columbia Forest Products

As members of the Nantahala/Pisgah Stakeholders Forum, we propose that the United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (FS) make the actions recommended in this proposal part of a New Management Plan for the Nantahala/Pisgah National Forests (NPNF) of western North Carolina. We fully support the 3 themes of the New Management Plan published in the FS document *Forestwide Objectives – Initial Set, June 30, 2016* and believe that our recommendations are fully compatible with these themes:

1. Provide clean/abundant water
2. Enhance and restore resiliency
3. Connect people to the land

This proposal is provided in two sections:

1. Forestwide Proposals
2. Geographic Area/Management Area Proposals

We have included proposal items suggested by other Stakeholder Forum members where we have been copied in the email draft exchanges and where we agree with the proposed item. It is the belief of the Forum members who have developed this

document, and the organizations they represent, that implementation of the recommendations in this proposal will have the following beneficial effects on the NPNF flora, fauna, users and the lands & waters:

1. Protecting the resources that the forest currently provides – especially clean and abundant water.
2. Enhancing the resiliency of the NPNF by restoring the diversity and continued persistence of native plant and animal communities to a more historically accurate mix, distribution, abundance and balance of conditions.
3. Supporting viable populations of wildlife, including species of conservation concern, threatened & endangered species, species in decline, game species and pollinators.
4. Emphasizing sustainable repair, recovery, restoration, and enhancing forest resources, habitat conditions, and infrastructure.
5. Focusing on sustainable recreation, community involvement, traditional and historical uses, aesthetic values, and economic opportunity.
6. Provide a wider mix of recreational opportunities to more people than the forest currently provides, including greatly increased opportunities for native wildlife viewing, photography and hunting.
7. Being more responsive to wildfire, a changing climate, insects, and disease. A key component of this point is to maintain forest roads for access, fire breaks and fuel load management by increased “daylighting” and other maintenance techniques.
8. Providing increased economic benefits to local communities and residents.
9. Restoring a balance of ecological conditions.
10. Basing forest management decisions on science and forest health and restoration.
11. Managing our National Forests as working forests in the true sense of a multiple use forest, and using the working forest model to develop win-win scenarios among the various uses.

A. FORESTWIDE PROPOSALS:

1. **NC State Natural Heritage Natural Areas:** Re-evaluate the existing NC State Natural Heritage Natural Areas (SNHNA). Evaluate them for their unique ecological qualities and determine the need for retention, restoration and/or treatment.

- a. Establish a process to define the boundaries for which the SNHNA's are established.
 - b. The USFS should engage in a scientifically rigorous process of evaluating each SNHNA to determine the need/reason for establishment and the best course of action for maintenance and restoration. In all cases, the professional staff of the USFS should decide on the validity of each area, the size of each area, and the best course of action for each of the SNHA'S.
 - c. Consider SNHNA's for restoration to maintain and improve the characteristics for which they were established.
 - d. In the event any new SNHNA's are proposed by the state, we propose that these new areas go through a rigorous public hearing process before being approved as SNHNA's.
 - a. On all SNHNA's, determine the management and land use history of the area, and if the function and feasibility of restoring NRV can be achieved.
- 2. Wildlife Priority:** Create 4000 to 6000 acres of quality young forest habitat annually. These figures agree with NRV and restoration needs. Greatly increase the focus on native wildlife to put it on an equal footing with other Forest priorities:
- a. Recognize the expertise of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) by implementing the science based NCWRC recommended Wildlife Alternative areas and Wildlife Habitat Active Management Areas (WHAMA). We fully support establishment of these areas as recommended on each GA/MA.
 - b. Recognize WHAMA's as focal areas of management at the greatest pace and scale for wildlife including early seral and young forest age classes.
 - c. Develop abundant open forests and grasslands to anticipate the dispersal of the reestablished elk herd in order to reduce farmland and garden predation and to reduce the occurrence of elk/vehicle accidents.
 - d. Improve management of the forest to enhance the abundance of wildlife. in order to provide a better experience for visitors to view, photograph, fish for or hunt our native wildlife.
 - e. Establish minimal buffers on ephemeral and intermittent streams.

3. **Forest Products Goal:** Establish sustainable timber harvesting strategies on those portions of the NPNF deemed suitable for harvesting to maintain an annual supply of forest products in order to:
 - a. Restore areas that have been degraded through past practices, disease, storms, insects, fire or other causes.
 - b. Create critically needed Early Successional and later seral classes and woodlands for wildlife habitat, over time.
 - c. Create a mosaic of various age classes and patch sizes of natural regeneration and desirable tree species as vegetation management projects are completed.
 - d. Benefit local economies.
 - e. Provide resources for the benefit of other resources, such as improving and increasing access, trails maintenance, establishment of firebreaks, and funding for a host of restoration needs (e.g. stream stabilization).

4. **Vegetation Management Methods:** Accomplish a balanced variety of structure and composition using all available silvicultural methods through innovative and traditional FS timber sale projects - Good Neighbor Authority with agencies of the state of NC, stewardship agreements with various organizations and any other types of projects that may become available and can be well managed. It is imperative that the USFS move beyond the 1,200 acre goals for early successional habitat suggested in the draft objectives.

5. **Connecting People to the Land:** Because of the permanence and restrictions that result from setting aside new wilderness areas we ask that the USFS respect and carefully consider the requests and resolutions of the counties and/or elected leaders regarding new wilderness designations as local buy-in is critical to any successful plan. Residents of the NPNF area look to their county and other elected leaders to represent their interests.

6. **Wilderness.** Recognize that over 150,000 acres of Inventoried Roadless Areas were added to the Nantahala/Pisgah National Forests since the 1994 amendment. Recognize the value of backcountry areas in providing solitude and other benefits. Recognize the efforts of NCWRC and others to collaborate on the wilderness issue by providing analyses of the management/restoration potential of proposed wilderness areas (NCWRC – 3 versions).

7. **Corridors and Byways – Scenery.** Many of the roads labeled as byways include wildlife habitat improvements. These roads have gates and are not used in the sense of a byway, yet they will be subject to scenery standards that will impede continued maintenance. This should be corrected. Also, some of the corridors (e.g. AT corridor in Black Mtn GA) take in wildlife fields. This needs to be adjusted or management guidelines should allow for continued upkeep of fields. The constraints of scenery along interface areas makes it highly unlikely that significant early successional habitat will be developed in these areas. Yet, within ½ mile of a road exists great opportunities for such work. There needs to be a thorough examination of the impacts of scenery standards on the management areas. This along with old growth, riparian, state natural heritage areas, and many of the other restrictions will limit ability to manage.

8. **Trails:**

- a. Maintain and enhance trails for multiple uses or specific uses on an as needed basis and where the demand is greatest, where the trail will provide access to unique features or the trail will provide a unique challenge to trail users. We propose linking FS roads and trails wherever practical and possible in order to provide loops and links to other roads/trails and to provide a return to the starting point without retracing the original route. Again, look for ways to synergize trail maintenance and upkeep with forestry operations.
- b. Projects involving active management along trail corridors should be designed to have minimal impacts to trail corridors and their special characteristics while achieving project objectives. Factors that contribute to the quality of the trail experience include the natural environment of plants, geology, wildlife viewing, and scenic views, up close and distant, among others. Trail users should be involved in pre-scoping of such projects to provide input concerning special characteristics of the trail experience, acceptable temporary disturbance to trail users, notification of road closures, opportunities to educate the public through signage, and opportunities to improve the trail experience following the project, i.e. providing opportunities for wildlife and scenic views and improving condition of the trail.
- c. Trail heads are well maintained and appropriately designed to meet the needs of the designated user(s) of the trails they serve.

9. **Access:** Prioritize reopening closed forest roads that are in excess of 5 miles in length so as to provide forest users access to forest areas that are beyond reasonable access. Consider other roads on an as needed/requested basis.
10. **Scenery:** We propose that Scenery Buffers along Forest roadways be limited to paved roads and that all gated roads, seasonally closed roads and unpaved roads, that are not used as “Scenery Routes” (if any), be included as part of the surrounding management area unless otherwise designated.
11. **Recreational User Groups:** Encourage the formation of broadly based user groups to advise, assist, communicate and maintain forest resources activities where these groups do not already exist or where their support and influence needs to be strengthened. We suggest that these groups be focused on an individual Geographic Area in order to build expertise and knowledge. Include sportsmen in these user groups.
12. **Forestwide Objectives:** Review the June 30, 2016 Forestwide Objectives document with the Stakeholders Forum, Forest Service specialists and the National Forest Foundation facilitators to update it to current agreements and conditions.
13. **Restoration – rhododendron:** Develop specific methods to economically treat rhododendron where it has become overwhelming to surrounding forest areas, especially streamside buffers.
14. **Hydrophytic Vegetation:** We recommend that management of a diversity of native hydrophytic tree species (red maple, box elder, black ash, tulip tree, sycamore, swamp white oak, swamp chestnut oak, black walnut, shellbark hickory, butternut, river birch, etc.) in riparian corridors (especially in areas that no longer retain the natural distribution of species) can help achieve the goal of “providing clean and abundant water”. Reference: *Caldwell, Peter; Declining water yield from forested mountain watersheds in response to climate change and forest mesophication; Coweeta Laboratory; 2016*
15. **National Recreation Areas:** We propose that the NPNF have no National Recreation Areas established in this Plan. We believe that the NPNF can be adequately managed by the FS for recreation without implementing special designations that impose new rules and regulations.

B. GEOGRAPHIC AREA (GA) /MANAGEMENT AREA (MA) PROPOSALS:

Note: We only addressed the GA's & MA's in areas that we are familiar with. We urge the FS to apply the principles in these proposals to the entire NPNF in the new management plan.

- 1. Fontana Lake, Hiwassee, Nantahala Gorge GA Approvals:** We are in agreement with the designations of Interface/Matrix/Backcountry/Special Interest Areas as shown on the May 2017 Pre-Draft maps for these GA's. We encourage the FS to review the public input from the Ranger District Open House Meetings and any input provided by the counties regarding these GA's.
- 2. Pisgah Ledge GA – Daniel Ridge/Cedar Rock MA's:** Follow the recommendations and agreements reached in the Small Group Meeting on August 2, 2017 regarding designating the areas outside the 2000' road buffers as Backcountry. We propose that areas outside the Backcountry designations are to be classified as Interface and Matrix as shown on the May 2017 Pisgah Ledge pre-draft map.
- 3. Pisgah Ledge GA– Daniel Ridge/Cedar Rock MA's:** Follow the recommendations of the Small Group Meeting members regarding trails in the area. The text of that agreement is: "Projects involving active management along trail corridors should be designed to have minimal impacts to trail corridors and their special characteristics while achieving project objectives. Factors that contribute to the quality of the trail experience include the natural environment of plants, geology, wildlife viewing, and scenic views, up close and distant, among others. Trail users should be involved in pre-scoping of such projects to provide input concerning special characteristics of the trail experience, acceptable temporary disturbance to trail users, notification of road closures, opportunities to educate the public through signage, and opportunities to improve the trail experience following the project, i.e. providing opportunities for wildlife and scenic views and improving condition of the trail.
- 4. Pisgah Ledge Recreation Proposal** The intent of this proposal is to recognize the local and regional importance of the Pisgah Ledge GA as a whole - as a major recreation designation, while at the same time valuing its historic and current importance in forest and wildlife conservation. With the increased visitation over the last 30 years it is evident that although the Hwy. 276 corridor sees the most visitors, both the east and west boundaries also have witnessed historic high

visitation. For these reasons, we feel it is important not to just put an emphasis on the 276 corridor but be clear on the descriptions for the entire GA in order to not only meet the corridor needs but to encourage recreation growth and resources over the whole GA so we don't lose the recreation experiences due to over use or resource degradation.

This proposal is to supplement the Pisgah Ledge Geographic Area and Management areas, updated May, 19 ,2017 by the USFS.

- a. Support road infrastructure and parking, that includes scenic byways, that allows adequate access to trail heads, camp sites, picnic areas and other heavily visited sites. (Waterfalls, wildlife viewing, climbing, hunting, fishing, paddling, etc.)
- b. Support and maintain the existing trails that meet the FS standards, and work to bring trails not in compliance up to standards.
- c. Recognize the diverse human powered recreation usage and support as many multi –use trails and areas as possible, knowing that some trails and areas will also need to be managed for specific uses for safety and environmental concerns. (loop, connectors, bike , horse, hike)
- d. Recognizes that both forestry and wildlife conservation practices not only can be compatible with recreation and has been, but we can also strive to change policies that will allow for revenue from these practices on Pisgah Ledge remain on this GA to further benefit recreation and other Pisgah Ledge resource needs.
- e. Support the day lighting (50- 100 ft from side of roads) and maintenance of gated FS roads. These roads are used for many forms of recreation. They also are important features for forest infrastructure including, fire breaks, wildlife habitat and forestry work.
- f. Recognize that some user groups need site specific, facilities and access. (horse trailer parking and camps, handicap sportsman, large groups, etc.) Work with FS and user groups to identify these areas and needs.
- g. Support a public education media within the GA that educates the public on forest and wildlife management, being a responsible user and other forest concerns. (Invasive, trash, safety, hunting seasons, bears, etc.)

- h. **EMERGENCY ACTIONS:** A plan of action to address the dead hemlocks and the dangers associated with the amount of dead trees and limbs that are present in the 276 corridor and the numbers of people vulnerable to them.
 - i. A plan of action that addresses the over use of stream side / road side camping and the effects on water quality from human waste and improper trash disposal.
 - j. **SUPPORT OF OTHER PROPOSALS.** Projects involving active management along trail corridors should be designed to have minimal impact on the trails and their special characteristics. Trail users should be involved early in the development of such projects to provide input concerning such things as acceptable temporary disturbance to trail users, opportunities to educate the public through signage, and opportunities to improve the trail experience following the project, i.e. providing opportunities for wildlife and scenic views and improving condition of the trail.
5. **Great Balsam GA - Cowee Mountain, Alarka MA Laurel:** Revise the Special Interest Area to include all native spruce in the Alarka Laurel area and to eliminate excessive area to the west devoid of any native spruce and in need of restoration to eliminate non-native spruce and to reduce dense rhododendron and restore that area to native hardwoods. The SIA has no full justification in the description and no indication of allowable management activities.
6. **Nantahala Mountains GA - Siler Bald, Tellico Bald, Wesser Bald MA's:** We believe that the recommendations in this proposal item are essentially compatible with the FS analysis published in the FS document *Refining Management Area Lines with WHAMAs and NAPs* and we support that analysis. We propose to establish these areas as Wildlife Priority Areas managed to benefit native wildlife, both game and non-game, through known management techniques including restoration, fire, timber harvest, establishment of a mosaic of seral classes including abundant ESH and any other applicable techniques; with the following recommendations:
- a. Manage the Appalachian Trail corridor according to established rules
 - b. Continue to manage the peak of Siler Bald as a mowed area to provide long range views
 - c. Manage the Trail of Tears Trail corridor according to established rules
 - d. Manage the Bartram Trail corridor according to established rules

- e. Manage any SNHNA's as requested in Item A, 1.
 - f. Manage Rufus Morgan Falls as a Special Interest Area.
 - g. Manage the Rufus Morgan trail as prescribed by trail management rules
 - h. Maintain the existing FS road network and allow the construction of a limited number of new FS roads on an "as needed for new projects" basis.
 - i. Determine if the Siler Bald cascade bog is to be designated as a Special Interest Area and designate it accordingly.
 - j. Designate the Siler Bald, Tellico Bald and Wesser Bald Management Areas as shown on the FS May 2017 pre-draft maps regarding Interface, Matrix, Backcountry, Trail Corridors and Special Interest Areas. Exclude any designations in these Management Areas for new wilderness or other designation that prevents management for wildlife beyond the limited Backcountry designation in Wesser Bald.
 - k. Daylight forest roads where feasible to provide greatly increased linear wildlife openings.
7. **Black Mountains GA, Big Ivy MA:** We propose that the Special Interest Area within the Big Ivy MA receive serious consideration for excluded areas for wildlife habitat creation/management. The FS roads within Big Ivy have been used for many years by hunters among other users. The area has past timber operations present. We specifically propose that the following FS roads receive daylighting treatment with, at least, intermittent treatment to develop ESH wildlife habitat. We are proposing this for FS roads, 74, 5555, 5548, 5552, 5586 and SR 197. We point out that other Forum interests have recommended "cherry stemmed" roads in areas proposed for Wilderness consideration/recommendation. We are asking for the same consideration for wildlife habitat in this MA Special Interest Area. We have no objection to the area beyond a reasonable buffer along the named roads being classified as a Special Interest Area.
8. **Highland Domes, Rivers:** We propose that the Chattooga River shall be managed as "outstanding waters", as they are designated, to provide an abundance of rainbow, brown and brook. trout. This proposal originates from a paper submitted to the FWCC by Mr. Bill Floyd, Cashiers, NC. The paper has been submitted to the FS by the FWCC.

9. FS Website, Plan Under Construction, Chapter 3, Management Areas;
Refining Management Area Lines with WHAMAs and NAPs;
(https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd543508.pdf):

We are encouraged by the WHAMA and wildlife habitat analysis and details in this document and need to study it further to determine if we can fully support all facets of the document. After review of the document, we propose a meeting of all interested parties to attempt to reach agreement on the major points.