

**DISCUSSION AGENDA OF Nantahala Mountains GEOGRAPHIC AREA
SMALL GROUP MEETING AGENDA**

Wednesday, July 26, 2017 12:00 – 4:00pm Franklin, NC 28734

The Meeting Outcomes:

1. One or more proposals of mutual interests are developed and described for the geographic area (s) of focus and discussion.
2. Members are committed to work toward mutual understanding and refine proposals where possible that present opportunities for continued dialogue and areas of concern between now and Aug 21.
3. For proposals that result in a range of disagreements, request that other Forum members review and provide suggestions to help foster mutual gains.

Resources Available:

- Please review the USFS map, description, and goals of the **NANTAHALA MOUNTAINS GA**:
www.fs.usda.gov/detail/nfsnc/home/?cid=fseprd491137
- Review Nantahala Mountains Synopsis document which is a summary of the June 6 Stakeholder Forum facilitated group discussions (narrative attached and the following pages specifically address the Nantahala Mountains GA: pgs: 1-2, 9-10, 16, 20-21).

Attending: Bob Gale, Jim Gray, Hugh Irwin, Andrea Leslie, Richard Mode, & Bill Yarbrough

*Group Exercise: **what interests are represented in the meeting?***

- Wildlife
- habitat and biodiversity (flora and fauna), abundance, dispersed across landscape
- Aquatic resources, priority game, and nongame species (species of greatest conservation need (e.g. rare)
- Outdoor recreation (trail corridors)
- Access
 - Old growth
- Connectivity
 - Wilderness Inventory Areas
- Local economies
 - Climate change (adaptation)
- Forest resilience/restoration (return to natural range of variation) (nonnative plants and insects)
- Balanced plan (meets mutual interests) (functional plan avoids litigation)
- Providing sustainable supply of early successional habitat (ESH)
- Conservation of unique natural features (rare habitats, Natural Heritage Program Natural Areas)
- Fire as an emergency fund (not general fund)
- Starred- Good stewardship will help facilitate resiliency/adaptation

Interests not in the room

- Timber (commercial timber harvesters)
- Trail interests
 - AT (ATC and other groups)
 - Bartram Trail
- Tribal
- Commercial recreation interests
 - Camps
 - Outdoor education
 - Guides
- Non-timber forest products
- County government/elected official
- Mineral collectors/mining
- Outdoor interests
 - Horse
 - Walk
 - Bike
 - Hike
- Science, research, and universities
- Cultural heritage, local knowledge

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Areas of Agreement:

Areas for Discussion – Nantahala Mountains GA

- 1. How can timber harvest and early successional habitat be increased while protecting and enhancing backcountry character, rare habitats and species, and old-growth forest in the Nantahala Mountains?"**

The group spent a lot of time discussing this “How can we...while at the same time...?” question as it seems to be one of the more core questions being raised by the SF.

- What is ESH increased to?
- How is BC character, rare habitats, species, and old growth forest:
 - Enhanced?
 - protected?
- And similarly, how is/are rare habitats, species, and old growth forest enhanced and/or protected when in interface and matrix to allow for increased ESH?

[note from Lou - added last bullet after meeting summary distribution as major topic of discussion]

Richard’s Proposal 1: Old growth and natural areas are administratively protected provided there is enough acreage left to expand all resources for early successional habitat. [Basically, if we agree to we agree protect old growth and state natural areas, and then there is enough ground left to ESH. Let’s move the conversation from philosophical to concrete, from argument to reason]. **The group discussed the proposal (see below and agreed on it as described below but did not vote on the proposal specifically).**

A starting point is to agree on a plan to protect old growth areas. This will then allow the designation of ESH areas. Looking at the map, there is a sense that we could have plenty of ESH, 2x or 3x times what is currently harvested, and protect areas what I’d like protected. The issue comes with the **MAPS**. That's my sense. It seems, when the response is unknown, as much as possible is put into suitability, which may not craft a plan, **craft a trust me plan**. Indeed, when a number of us are willing to compromise, we can have it all. I can open up eco areas that need harvest, etc; but now these areas are off the table. MAPS are not clear about location sites: old growth, SHPA, timber sites, set asides, river corridors where restoration would be useful, ...

The MAP exercise we did awhile ago was a similar approach. Had we stayed with it – we might have achieved and designated those areas early on. NAPs and WHAMAs. The NAPs, overlaid with WHAMAs. Everything else is agreement. The overlap of those is where there should have been disagreement between natural area priorities and wildlife priorities. We recognized that, and didn't discuss those. That could have beneficial.

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Jim's Proposal 2: We propose to increase timber harvest and ESH, while protecting and enhancing back country character, rare habitats and species, and old growth forests in the Nantahala Mountain GA as designated by the interface, matrix, and BC designations on the May 2017 pre-draft maps, *[the kicker] as long as the counties agree.* (Macon, Clay, Graham, Swain, Cherokee).

The group weigh-in on this proposal as follows:

- M1: cannot support the "kicker"
- M2: remove county politics from federal process
- M3: encourage engagement of ranger within local communities & civic duties, forest planning is a local issue, statement good though kicker not needed to engage local community
- M4: cannot support kicker, can't endorse Slier Bald as listed on pre-draft 2017 MAP.
- M5: not in attendance

Real problem is accepting the kicker. Be like ensuring that state, federal, and all local governments accept the plan. Where does it stop? Wanted to reemphasize, the counties have input as do other bodies of governance through the SF.

Little History lesson: long standing tie between counties and USFS. Read about the lands nobody wanted. How Counties begged for FS to purchase the land nobody wanted. People loved the Rangers in their communities because they participated in churches and lions club. If you want rangers and others to realize what pieces are important, they need to go back to that. Rangers have a lot to say about projects and that comes for local people.

Proposal 3: What is ESH increased to? The group discussed but did not agree to the range – 1200-6000ac/yr

M1: you could say, 1200 ac/yr as FS has talked about in their goals to at least 2,000 ac/year – which could still protect backcountry, Nas, old growth. Allocated proportionally, could be above 2,000, maybe 3,000. I am concerned about 4,000/yr of shifting mosaic rotational harvest.

M2: could request 6,000ac/yr. My scientists have said 6,000 acres is the right number.

M3: above the traditional 800ac/yr, we should see an increase in jobs. And each GA may be different.

M4: Nantahala is the largest district at 300,000ac, about a third of the forest, which is striking. One of the larger GAs. Proportionally, may want to look at a higher number. If its 4,000 acres a year, 80,000 acres in 20 years. Counties are going to impact regardless. If you go to them and say cutting 4,000 acres a year, 5,000 dollars an acre for timber. Significant amount of tax 20% goes to schools. Bring loggers to be able to help private land owners too. Job the biggest for counties.

Concern about the higher 6,000ac- would it be consistent with long range forest condition for old growth which is a plan component and would it be sustainable?. That long term desired condition may have faulty assumptions. Can you have your scientists review? 6,000 would be 60,000 per ten years, 120,000 acres in 20 years. That doesn't even fit with age for suitable base.

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Maybe you could do *4,000 acres of restoration forestry a year*, but under implementation of this plan, it's clear that *a lot matrix and interface would be rotational forestry*, which from an ecological standpoint is future restoration problems. Setting at higher level creating more ecological problems than solving so then 4,000ac/yr is concerning, if its predominantly rotational harvest.

My concern is that in matrix and interface, are suitable lands, shifting mosaic of habitats rotational forestry. No confidence that's sustainable. If over the life of the plan it was 4,000 old pine plantations uncharacteristic forest, but that high a level of rotational forestry, it will be tough to support.

Some else asks: even if all the other areas of your interest are protected? Because you are the only one talking about rotational forestry.

Another member weighs in: if everything we want to see protected is protected, and then I not sure I have as much of a problem with that ecologically. Sounds like it could be done. If affecting W and SNRA area, could see it, but already said we don't worry about – that these areas are off the table.

2. **"What areas in the Nantahala Mountains have the broadest support for protective designations?"** Group did not discuss.
3. **"What types of restoration have the broadest support in the Nantahala Mountains?"** Group did not discuss.
4. **Siler Bald/Tellico Bald/Wesser Bald Management Area Proposal (Jim's):**
first cut and will need more work; may add to this idea before any call or meeting as things come to mind. Preamble sets stage for my input/ideas and for discussion:
 - We are working as Stakeholders to make recommendations for a management plan for a 1.1 million acre national forest.
 - As I have said throughout the Stakeholders Forum process there is 66,000 acres of Wilderness designated, additional acres of Wilderness Study Area, Inventoried Roadless Area and other designations amounting to approximately 275,000 acres (26%) of Nantahala/Pisgah National Forest (NPNF) land off limits to timber cutting (2014 Assessment). Significant additional acres are being recommended/proposed in various categories that will increase this total in the new Plan. The groups advocating more lands being off limits to timber cutting have voiced the goal of increasing the total to 50% or more
 - Areas protected from timber harvest under the various designations are finite areas. In addition, there are areas in all(?) management areas where advocacy groups identify "old growth", "state natural heritage areas" or other special reasons that timber cannot be harvested in that area even though the area is designated as Interface/Matrix/Backcountry. There are no equivalent situations for wildlife.
 - Numerous species of wildlife (game & non-game) have declined in abundance where closed canopy forest exists or forest has matured into closed canopy forest
 - Timber harvest is the most expeditious means to develop high quality Early Successional Habitat and succeeding seral habitat stages beneficial to various species of wildlife and various life stages of wildlife

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- There is not one single acre of NPNF designated/dedicated to wildlife.
- The FS has been authorizing approximately 800 acres of timber harvest per year. More mature forest is added each year than is cut. The current timber harvest estimates from the FS is that 650 to 1200 acres of timber can be harvested per year under current situations
- The NPNF contains less than 1% Early Successional Habitat
- The Siler Bald/Tellico Bald/Wesser Bald Management Areas are significant high altitude, oak/poplar/maple/etc. hardwood forest. There is significant rhododendron/mountain laurel growth in need of restoration. A base of wildlife species exists, but except for bear, is not abundant.
- The Siler Bald/Tellico Bald/Wesser Bald Management Areas contain little, if any, unique habitat that is not represented in other Geographic Areas or Management Areas
- The Siler Bald/Tellico Bald areas contain significant amounts of existing FS roads

Proposal 1: The Nantahala Mountains provide a unique opportunity for a bold project.

- Accept the Interface/Matrix/Backcountry designations for Siler Bald/Tellico Bald/Wesser Bald as shown on the pre-draft maps dated May 2017.
- Establish no restrictions on how the FS can manage the Siler Bald/Tellico Bald/Wesser Bald Management Areas beyond the normal practices. Agree not to challenge FS projects as long as the identified protected areas are honored.
- Drop the dotted green line areas (Public recommended to be reconsidered as Recommended Wilderness) around each of these Management Areas.
- Recommend the standard protection corridor for the Appalachian Trail
- Recommend the standard protection area for Wayah Bald
- Recommend that Siler Bald continue to be mowed for the viewscape provided to AT hikers.
- Recommend that a small Special Interest Area be established to protect the cascade bog identified by Josh in Siler Bald MA.
- Recommend that Rufus Morgan Trail and Rufus Morgan Falls be established as a Special Interest Area
- Recommend that State Natural Heritage Areas be continued to be honored
- Recommend that the FS give priority to restoration, habitat creation and timber harvest with a primary focus on creating wildlife habitat and encouraging wildlife abundance
- Create a Wildlife Habitat Priority area in the Siler Bald and Tellico Bald MA's.
- Write a proposal to establish a long term wildlife monitoring project in conjunction with the FS, major wildlife organizations, the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, a major university offering research capability in Southern Appalachian Wildlife Management, volunteers, etc.
- Seek a grant(s) to fund the above project
- Determine a wildlife (game & non-game) status baseline at the beginning of the project
- Conduct periodic wildlife monitoring studies as determined by the project team
- Continue the project for the life of the Plan being developed
- Publish annual reports
- Encourage a scientific paper to be published to summarize and document the project

Summary:

- This is a bold move that could go a long way to resolving some of the differences between advocates

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- There are other options that could be discussed in other areas in return for development of this proposal
- I believe Macon County would heartily endorse this proposal, thus helping reduce the county opposition
- I think we should consider a similar proposal in the Pisgah NF in order to balance the new Plan for wildlife and hunting interests in both National Forests

Jim withdrew proposal for the Siler Bald/Wesser Bald/Tellico Bald management areas. Withdrawal was based on Jim's discussion with A. Nicholas at the Lake Toxaway FWCC meeting. Could be components of proposal are possible with additional work and buy-in from other members. Proposal taken off table before each section could be considered. Though there was concern expressed from one group regarding the core area located in areas of old growth and state natural areas.

Group did discuss that a section near Roan had been managed/targeted for ESH and those portions of the Nantahala that have had intensive management. Implications for active management, pros and cons, and not establishing an agreed upon harvest amount were also examined and discussed.

5. **Strawman #1 Proposal Based on the May 2017 pre-draft map of the Nantahala Mountains Geographic Area (NMGA)** provided by the Forest Service. Revision of #4 above. (Jim submitted following the Nantahala GA small group meeting and is presented here for future proposal development).

Purpose/Considerations:

An effort to seek a starting point for a recommendation to the Stakeholders Forum and Forest Service (FS) for a portion of the NMGA. There are no areas within the Nantahala/Pisgah National Forests that are specifically identified and managed for wildlife habitat and wildlife abundance. The decline/low population of certain wildlife species makes it a desirable objective to help boost wildlife populations and demonstrate the effectiveness of habitat management. The NMGA is the ideal place for consideration of an area focused on wildlife habitat due to altitude, existing forest conditions, access via existing forest roads, base population of desirable species, need for restoration to desired vegetative species composition. The NMGA is widely recognized as an ideal location within the Appalachian Mountains for the reintroduction of chestnut when a viable variant is developed. Chestnut reintroduction will require preparation of forest conditions and would be extremely beneficial to wildlife.

Elements of Strawman #1:

- Establish a Wildlife Priority Area consisting of the Siler Bald/Tellico Bald/Wesser Bald Management Areas (STWMA).
- The Wildlife Priority Area to be managed for all species of wildlife – game and non-game species.
- Accept the Interface/Matrix/Backcountry designations shown on the map in the STWMA without restrictions or qualifications.
- Remove from consideration the “Public Proposed Wilderness Areas” in the STWMA depicted by green dotted lines on the map.

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- Acknowledge that the Forest Service has authority to manage the STWMA for timber harvest/restoration/access for the creation of enhanced habitat for wildlife and restoration of desired species with the condition that timber harvest projects must be economically viable. Agree that the FS has full authority to conduct forestry operations that are within FS rules and guidelines.
- Establish an Advisory Group (AG) to stay apprised of Forest Service planned activities in the STWMA, to advise on wildlife species habitat needs, to recommend projects or modifications to projects. This AG to consist of representation from the Forest Service, environmental groups, wildlife advocacy groups, recreation groups, the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. The AG to exist for the life of this Management Plan or as the AG determines. The AG is advisory and will not have veto power over projects.
- Agree to not challenge, object to or take other actions to stop projects proposed by the FS.

In return for acceptance of Strawman #1, the NMSGM will collaborate on other areas within the NMGA with the objective of identifying and supporting other areas that can be recommended for more restrictive designations (recommended Wilderness, Backcountry, etc.). To facilitate acceptance by all constituencies, including the public and the county(s), convene a meeting to include county commission representation to exclude the agreed upon recommended more restrictive designated areas from the county resolution opposing additional wilderness.

Further, Jim Gray will work with the Ruffed Grouse Society to seek cooperative wildlife biologist support on the area, will work to seek funding (from multiple organizations and sources) for a mulching machine that will be capable of restoring areas to desired conditions (including ESH of desirable species) and will seek input/guidance/research on effective ways to restore dense rhododendron patches on steep areas to desired conditions. If a mulching machine is acquired, it would be donated to the FS or the NCWRC and would be available for use in other Geographic Areas on an available basis. I will kick things off by making a \$1000 pledge to the mulching machine fund if we can reach agreement on Strawman #1.

Next Steps: Proposal Open for Development

Let's discuss it, make proposals, etc. If there are proposals for major changes to the footprint on the ground, please furnish large scale maps that will allow the NMSGM to understand the areas being proposed. Hopefully, this Strawman #1 will provide a basis for moving forward. If so, let's convene another meeting soon. Thanks for your consideration (Jim Gray).