

Stakeholders Forum for the Nantahala & Pisgah Plan Revision

Monday, September 25, 2017

10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Lake Logan Episcopal Center
25 Wormy Chestnut Lane, Canton

Stakeholders Forum:

Kevin Colburn, American Whitewater
Chris Coxen, National Wild Turkey Federation
*Rob Elliot, Evergreen Packaging
*Sam Evans, Southern Environmental Law Center
*Susan Fletcher, Pisgah Hardwood
*Jim Gray, Ruffed Grouse Society
Bill Hodge, Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards
Fred Hardin, Columbia Forest Products
*Ruth Hartzler, Carolina Mountain Club
Lang Hornthal, Root Cause
Hugh Irwin, The Wilderness Society
*Bill Kane, NC Wildlife Federation
*Josh Kelly, MountainTrue

Zach Lesch-Huie, Access Fund
Andrea Leslie, NC Wildlife Resources Commission (shared seat)
*Deirdre Perot, Back Country Horsemen of NC, NC Horse Council
David Reid, NC Sierra Club
Curtis Smalling, National Audubon of NC
Morgan Somerville, Appalachian Trail Conservancy
Megan Sutton, The Nature Conservancy
Julie White, SORBA/IMBA
*David Whitmire, Fish and Wildlife Conservation Council
*Organizing Committee members

Forest Service:

Michelle Aldridge
Sheryl Bryan
Alice Cohen
Chad Cook
Cathy Dowd
Erik Crews
Logan Free

Gary Kaufman
Nick Larson
Allen Nicholas
Susan Parker
Tim Slone
Michael Wilkins

Alternates/Observers:

Bob Gale, MountainTrue (alternate for Josh Kelly)
Jill Gottesman, The Wilderness Society (alternate for Hugh Irwin)
G. Richard Mode, NC Wildlife Federation (alternate for Bill Kane)
Robin Ramsey, Office of Senator Richard Burr
Jon Hallemeier, Coweeta History Project (note-taker for the National Forest Foundation)

National Forest Foundation:

Karen DiBari
Mary Lou Addor

Meeting Objectives:

- Gain clarity and agreement about the proposal decision process and vision for success
- Identify clear milestones for the Sep 25 meeting, Nov 8 meeting and in between
- In order to honor the proposal development work people did this summer, efficiently review all proposals and identify the range of agreement and disagreement
- Discuss key topics/issues that offer opportunities for increased understanding and agreement, and identify appropriate next steps
- Consider action regarding a Stakeholders Forum statement to the media for release after the meeting

Summary

In the *Welcome and Greetings*, Allen Nicholas and Michelle Aldridge expressed their thanks for the hard work of the Forum and outlined the next steps for the agency as it moves into alternative development. Rob Elliot updated the group on county outreach and an upcoming American Forestry Foundation conference. In the *Straw Poll*, Karen DiBari outlined a vision for success for the day and longterm. Stakeholders Forum (SF) members each responded to the over 158 proposals, marking them as green/thumbs up, yellow/thumbs sideways, orange/potential support, and blue/thumbs down. In the *Straw Poll Debrief*, the proposals were organized by support and the group split into two, with the first discussing forest wide issues of ecological restoration and the second working through the set of Pisgah Ledge Geographic (GA) proposals. In *Ecological Restoration*, the first group discussed a potential ecological restoration Management Area (MA) and compared this to a change in the interface MA to focus on restoration and the development of standards and guidelines that emphasize ecological restoration. In *Next Steps*, the group discussed adding the straw poll information to the google doc for further proposal development, subjects for future topical meetings, and the potential of sending out a media statement.

Welcome and Greetings

Karen welcomed the group and thanked everyone for their hard work in preparation for the day. She identified herself, Mary Lou Addor, and Alice Cohen as helping with facilitation for the day and Jonathan Hallemeier as the note taker.

Forest Supervisor Allen Nicholas expressed his appreciation for the work put into the proposals by diverse groups and commended the Organizing Committee and National Forest Foundation for organizing all the proposals to be sent out. There has been a lot of activity over the past months, including open houses, Fish and Wildlife Conservation Council meetings, Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Partnership meetings, and agency meetings with counties. To honor all this work, Allen wants what comes out next in the planning process to be recognizable to people so they can see their values in it and identify opportunities to do what they want to do on federal land. He expressed his excitement for today's conversations and for the opportunity for the agency to understand where people are. There are still some holes in the plan, such as in scenery and recreation, which have not been fully developed yet, which is frustrating to everyone.

Allen described the next steps for the Forest Service team, moving into the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The work done here will inform the range of alternatives the agency builds and what makes sense to analyze, helping to identify where agreement is and the range where there is disagreement. Consensus is not necessary today and there is room for future conversations. Allen reaffirmed that the final decision space belongs to the agency, but that a broadly supported plan is the exciting piece of all this. The plan is important, but the collaboration and work that goes on in implementation is the most exciting. If we can get the plan right and ratchet back conflict, we can get work done at a pace and scale unheard of.

Alice Cohen read a series of headlines (ex. "Collaboration pays off big for local economy, wildlife, people, and Forest Service"). These were headlines written in at the April 2014 meeting prior to the establishment of the Stakeholders Forum (SF). Alice reflected on the huge amount of work put in between then and now, reminding the group how far they have come and the bridges built and being built for the future.

Michelle Aldridge explained what the agency plans on doing with the information from the SF. The Forest Service is committed to honoring the time and work invested in the proposals developed by the SF members, and if the planning team does not adopt an idea, they will explain why. Michelle also spoke to the next steps and how the range of alternatives work. We do not have to get the forest plan perfect before the EIS, but we do want to make sure that the range is right for the plan components that vary so we do not have to circle back to the beginning. While developing proposals, SF members asked for Forest Service feedback, but the agency did not want to inhibit creative thinking. There are lots of good ideas, some that the agency can pick up and run with and some that might need to move or change. Michelle commended people for sticking to proposals at the plan level, which is difficult. Things like specific roads cannot be analyzed in a model of 1.1 million acres.

Michelle emphasized that the agency will be integrating many comments and many subjects. Some ideas may sound great until they are integrated into the plan and then become more complicated. However, she reaffirmed that the agency will say why something is not picked up. There are also hundreds of other comments in the form of letters, emails, and attachments from the public, and the agency must consider the full range of ideas.

Rob Elliot updated the group on county outreach. Lang Hornthal helped, along with David Whitmire, Jill Gottesman, and Jim Gray with specific counties. The invitations sent out to counties invited them to attend SF meetings or for SF members to go to a location of the county's choosing. There is dialogue among counties and there may be multi-county meetings. While there is nothing concrete now, discussions are ongoing.

Rob also announced that on October 30th the American Forest Foundation will host a sustainable forestry conference in western North Carolina. The conference will focus on silviculture and there will be tours of sites. If there is interest in silvicultural techniques and theory, this is a good place for a deep dive.

Karen announced that there will be a “decompression reception” after the meeting put together by the Organizing Committee in recognition of all the hard work done by the group.

Straw Poll

Karen explained what success means for the day and in general, for the work of the SF. The hope for the day is to use the range of voices in this room to test possible agreement on proposals, identify areas of opportunity to broaden agreement, and document the range of disagreement. Success does not mean total support of a proposal but rather in getting input from the unique range provided by this group. Karen also clarified that consensus in the code of conduct of this group is if everyone is thumbs up or thumbs to the side/can live with it.

To get a snapshot of what people think about the ~158 proposals, the group will conduct a straw poll. The proposals are numbered and a tally sheet for each of them was spread around the room. The rows of the tally sheets were each labeled with the names of SF members/alternates. Each sheet had four columns for tally marks. The first is green, indicating full support/thumbs up. The second column is yellow, indicating can live with it/thumbs to the side. The third is orange, indicating potential support with a specific change or something else in place. The fourth column is blue, indicating lack of support/thumbs down. In the case of orange and blue tallies, members must write the reason why in the fifth comments column to explain what could help shift the proposal towards yellow or green.

The NFF distributed the proposals in three packets, one of Geographic Area proposals, one of Management Area proposals, and one of Forest Wide proposals. Proposers names were shown in blue, along with the proposal number. The proposals were printed from the google docs and comments made (as of the afternoon of 9/22) on the google docs for specific proposals are in endnotes.

Each member was asked to respond to every proposal, placing a mark to indicate green, yellow, orange, or blue levels of support, along with comments when needed. Members could also write “abstain” when appropriate. The results will be tallied and used to identify proposals with a lot of agreement, with potential for dialogue and progress, and with a wide range of opinion on more contentious proposals. These results will inform what discussions may be fruitful in the afternoon and beyond this meeting.

Group discussion:

- Concern raised that if a member gives provisional support to proposals for active management and others unilaterally do not support other interests like backcountry or wilderness, then the outcome of the exercise will be lopsided. Documenting the range of disagreement may incentivize members to make the range as wide as possible to weigh the result further towards their interest.
- Other group members pointed out that many of these proposals hang on one another, and support for one proposal may ride on support for others.
- Karen and Lou emphasized that broad support gives strength to a proposal and makes it easier for the Forest Service to incorporate it into their thinking, incentivizing coming together on proposals. They reminded the group that whenever someone indicates lack of support, they must write a clear rationale of what would help them get to support.

After some minor edits to the proposal documents to revise proposal numbers, group members began the straw poll, moving around the room to visit each tally sheet. MA and Forest Wide proposals were on the main table and GA proposals with GA maps were placed around the room.

Straw Poll Debrief

The straw poll transitioned into lunch and the tally sheets were collected. If all the tallies were green or yellow, the sheets were placed on a green wall. If there were orange and up to three blue tallies, the sheets were left where they were for potential discussion. If there were more than three blue tallies, the sheets were placed on a blue wall. After the tally, there were 15 proposals on the green wall, a number on the blue wall, and the bulk were in the orange category.

Participants expressed appreciation of the straw poll exercise and the way it allowed for members to respond to many proposals on their own time, taking the pressure off. There were several issues that drove people towards marking orange and blue tallies.

- Some members needed more information to understand some proposals and some proposals are contingent on other Forest Wide proposals, particularly concerning ecological restoration.
- There was also concern about the relationship between acres of active management in Forest Wide goals and GA level decisions of where this should happen as well as proposal language that focuses on timber harvest exclusively to get to habitat needs. Looking at many isolated proposals for back country and wilderness does not give an idea of how they would collectively impact the forest and the area available for habitat management.
- The Wilderness Society has the acreages for their proposals that may help answer this question.

The group discussed next steps in light of the straw poll. A small group decided to talk about the Pisgah Ledge GA specific proposals and much of the group stayed in the main room to talk about ecological restoration.

Ecological Restoration

Although there wasn't a specific proposal on ecological restoration, it was proposed by some members as a way to reach more agreement on more areas of the forest. There are areas that some members are uncomfortable with being in matrix or interface but in which they would still welcome some active management, if it is geared towards specific stand characteristics and the needs of the site. There are also places that are in back country that could use more active management if geared in this way. Three concepts came out of the discussion for how to include ecological restoration in a way that may increase agreement on these sorts of places:

1. A new ecological restoration MA could be created and these sensitive areas could be placed spatially into that MA (embedded in proposal 133, appendix A in the forest wide proposals). There is some confusion over what ecological restoration is. Definition offered: ecological restoration as a treatment that is not done just for balancing age classes, but also for composition, structure, function, and connectivity. This may mean treating the same area multiple times.

2. The interface MA could be revised to be more restoration focused to become “restorface.” Another option would be to fold in more of a restoration focus into the interface MA (restoface). This interface+ could be socially driven. From a recreation standpoint, it provides the opportunity to do work in sensitive areas and communicate a strong story to the public.
3. Standards and guidelines could be created that call out sensitive areas and opportunities to restore early successional habitat in matrix and interface MAs (proposals 126, 127, 128, and 129 in the MA proposals).

The group discussed these options.

- Early on in the SF process, a committee had recommended an ecological restoration-type MA (mid-country) to aid in working through issues.
- People are interested in seeing maps of what a potential ecological restoration MA would look like on the landscape. Hugh Irwin has maps that could be made available.
- Does this approach micromanage the Forest Service.
- One benefit of an ecological restoration MA is in streamlining implementation by making spatially explicit where projects will need clear purposes and statements related to restoration. In this scenario, regeneration projects in matrix would have lots of flexibility and would be easy to get through. Projects could be done in ecological restoration areas but would need to take into account site level and not just landscape level concerns.
- Too much flexibility in the plan may translate into a need for more work and collaboration at the project level in sensitive contexts to work through issues not decided now. More clarity in the plan can incentivize working together on projects but does not require the Forum to remain together.
- Several expressed the need for more specifics of the proposal, the economic feasibility of restoration projects where there is little marketable timber, and the place-specific consequences, reaffirming the need to work through Natural Area Priorities (NAP) and Wildlife Habitat Active Management Areas (WHAMA).
- A few members are concerned about changing MAs this late in the game and ask if a new MA is needed and if the standards and guidelines would be enough to solve conflict. Others are concerned that standards and guidelines don’t address the issue adequately, given that some of the NAPs are larger than the matrix or interface areas where they are embedded and that there would be effectively two sets of standards and guides that may create ambiguity.
- Some want clarification on the stand specific recommendations in ecological restoration because they see all projects as making stand specific recommendations. Some feel that stand specific prescriptions currently can end up degrading stands that were doing well and that ecological restoration requires starting with a degraded area. Comment: Many stands are or will get to a degraded point, and if you get the wrong outcome from a treatment, it may be from using the wrong technique in that case but it was still an attempt at ecological restoration.
- What are the benefits of a potential ecological restoration MA compared to the costs to the hard work already done by the Forest Service? Michelle answers that she is interested in seeing Hugh’s maps but that a new MA could have cascading effects on other plan components. Michelle also provides some context for the interface MA and cautions the SF that much thought has gone into creating it to solve certain problems. A new MA may solve some problems, but issues are interconnected and throwing in a new thing influences all the others. She remains open to other ways to approach the issue and suggests using the GA construct to help tackle the

problem. Some members are open to this, but some remain concerned about the ambiguity of how GA information will be interpreted and applied in developing projects. Allen asks how projects would be developed differently if NAPs were defined regardless of which MA they are in vs if they were in an ecological restoration MA. Some members remain concerned that there are areas that need to be called out spatially and distinctly.

Next Steps

The group working on GA proposals returned and the whole group discussed about next steps.

- The NFF will incorporate the tallies from the straw poll will into the google docs, specifically listing any comments with commenter names who registered orange or blue so that proposers can follow up to see if they can move orange and blue towards yellow and green. A timeline for these activities will be sent out so that revised proposals can be brought back to the group and the November 8th meeting.
- Michelle clarified that the planning team is moving forward in October to start building alternatives. Comments received later may become more difficult to fold in. However, the straw poll information of agreements and range of disagreements is valuable to the Forest Service and Michelle does not want to disincentivize creative thinking through orange and blue proposals over the coming weeks

Members recommend scenery, the NC Natural Heritage Program, and the Region 8 Restoration Strategy for special topic-focused meetings.

The group then discussed a potential statement to the media about the progress of the SF, drafted by Jim and with edits from others on the OC. The NFF distributed copies and members read through the draft. Comments and group discussion:

- Question about whether “milestone” is accurate and if it is appropriate to call out restoration as an agreement when that remains a contentious issue. Some members think the real milestone may be after the meeting in November.
- Suggestion to show the diversity of the group more through quotes for various members, particularly quotes that show members supporting other interests.
- Suggestion to highlight at the beginning the diverse groups involved. Communicating the existence of the SF is important information for the public.
- Michelle added that the agency is planning on publishing a thank you to western NC for sharing feedback, and this sort of statement could be a good package. The organizing committee will take the feedback and revise the statement.

The meeting adjourns and members move on to the “decompression reception” outside.