

## **Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Stakeholders Forum Proposal**

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Proposal supporters:

Chris Coxen, National Wild Turkey Federation

Gary Peters, NC Chapter, National Wild Turkey Federation

Jim Gray, Ruffed Grouse Society

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### Adjustment to the Vegetation Management Forest-wide Plan Component Language

These goals were presented to the Forest Partnership and were favorably received, pending concerns over ecozone specificity, potential water quality impacts, and disturbance and fragmentation due to road building. The current version of this language will be further developed within the Partnership to create condition based objectives for specific ecozones and identify priority areas based on ecozone departure and access.

These adjustments reflect the annual management targets required to meet forest-wide ecozone restoration needs as identified through the Forest Service NRV model, the Wildlife Resources Commission Bird Matrix model, and the Fire Learning Network SBR model. Italicized language provides restoration justification for these Vegetation Management objectives.

This language is being submitted in its current form to bring these concepts into the Forum setting and to provide concrete management goals associated with restoration-based forest needs to stimulate group conversation and collaboration.

### **Contribute 3,000 to 4,500 acres of forest to early seral/young forest conditions each year**

This goal can be accomplished by:

- 2,500 - 3,000 acres of regeneration, including a variety of silvicultural treatments as needed to restore stand level composition and structure goals
- 1,500 acres of thinning and timber stand improvement projects

*There is an estimated 30,000 acres (likely conservative) of uncharacteristic white pine across the forest. Annual acreage goals could be met through restoration in these sites alone.*

*Regeneration should be used as a tool to restore departed ecosystem composition and structure. Fire adapted ecosystems, such as High Elevation Red Oak, Dry Oak, Pine-Oak/Heath, and Shortleaf Pine are associated with a greater amount of early seral conditions relative to other ecozones, with closed canopy conditions driving departure. These ecozones should contain a greater amount of these management activities relative to other ecozones given NRV and historic disturbance regimes.*

*Regeneration activities within other ecozones should mimic natural disturbances to create patches of uneven age conditions within the larger, less frequently disturbed community. Young forest habitat within highly productive, infrequently burned sites would have likely been historically maintained through large grazing animals. Given the absence of these ecosystem engineers, silvicultural techniques should be used to maintain a flow of uneven age conditions associated with small scale disturbance. These conditions have been well documented to increase local plant and wildlife biodiversity. Patches of uncharacteristic yellow poplar dominated stands are excellent targets for this work. Removal of these stands, and post-harvest treatments to reduce poplar stem competition, will help restore the related ecosystem to reference condition.*

*The Forest Service should also partner with the Wildlife Resources Commission, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the National Wild Turkey Federation, and other interested partners, in the reestablishment of elk across the National Forest. Elk-human conflicts on private lands will be one of the biggest hurdles related to elk restoration in North Carolina. The National Forest can ameliorate these conflicts by prioritizing the creation of young seral habitat corridors available for elk use. Prioritizing these habitats within the scope of elk restoration will add young seral habitat for wildlife while also fostering the expansion of native ecosystem engineers (elk) that will naturally maintain these habitats and reduce the need for future human intervention.*

*Over 130,000 acres have been identified for potential American chestnut restoration. Restoration activities can include various forms of regeneration cuts prior to chestnut seedling planting, depending on site conditions. These management activities can provide young forest habitat while simultaneously establishing new chestnut populations, given chestnut has been shown to vigorously respond and outcompete other associates after disturbance.*

*Part of the unique biodiversity of the Southern Appalachians is due to high elevation, young seral habitats that support wildlife more commonly associated with northern latitudes. Many of these species are priority species within the Wildlife Resources Commission State Wildlife Action Plan due to habitat loss. The National Forest can provide a reliable source of habitat for these species should these habitats continue to decline on private lands.*

*Forest products also provide income to our local economy. There is a strong local movement for locally sourced goods, but this fails to translate to wood products. Wood products sourced from the National Forest will benefit our local economy, be more ethically harvested, more sustainable, and subject to greater environmental regulation relative to products produced in many other countries. If we continue to use wood products regardless of their point of origin, why would we not choose to have more control over how they are sourced?*

## **Provide 4,000 to 6,000 acres of open forest conditions each year.**

This goal can be accomplished by:

- 3,000 to 4,000 acres of commercial/non-commercial treatments as needed based on forest composition and structure restoration goals
- 1,000 to 2,000 acres of prescribed fire designed for significant basal area reduction

*All management activities designed for this goal should be initially focused on areas that are most easily managed through regular fire return intervals, i.e. stands within existing burn units, or stands that can be easily incorporated into existing burn units. These systems are highly (65 – 80%) departed and will benefit from mechanical treatments to reduce canopy closure prior to implementing regular prescribed burns. Pine dominated stands require 3 – 5 year fire return intervals to maintain reference conditions, while oak/hickory dominated stands require 10 – 18 year intervals, depending on site conditions. The Fire Learning Network SBR model estimates that there are ~300,000 acres of fire adapted (< 18 year fire return interval) habitat across all mapped ecosystems.*

*Following the FLN SBR model alone, if there's an average of 73% departure across the six most departed ecosystems, there are 210,000 acres in need of restoration on the National Forest. Once restored back to woodland or savanna ecosystems, these sites should be maintained through regular, low intensity fire. The National Forest should prioritize the creation of new fire lines to increase the implementation capacity of prescribed fire across the forest. Assuming we follow this rate of annual management, and conditions are frozen in time, it will take 50 years to restore these 210,000 acres. Given these needs, woodland restoration should be one of the highest priorities of the Forest Service through this next plan.*

*Old growth forest conditions and values are innately intertwined with this goal. The FLN SBR team has documented lack of old growth as a factor driving ecosystem departure in hardwood dominated fire adapted systems. Management activities can accelerate the restoration of the composition and structure of these systems, which inherently means leaving large, old trees. The Region 8 Guidance for Conserving and Restoring Old-Growth Forest Communities on National Forests in the Southern Region document also supports this concept. **“Recent vegetative management activities which maintain characteristics consistent with old growth probably would not disqualify an area as existing old growth. Examples of these activities may include commercial thinnings, mid-story treatments, prescribed fire, or interpretive trails.”***