

Meeting Summary
Bankhead Liaison Panel Meeting
September 28, 2023
Moulton Church of Christ

FS staff present – Andy Scott, Tyler Fish, Jason Harris, Allison Cochran, Dawn Suiter, (Virtual) Dr. Stacy Clark.

Liaison Panel Members and Public present – Donna Shanklin, Marsha Roberston, Kerry Steedley, Michael Walker, Kim Waites, Mike Aaron, Mike Bagwell, Karen Hulbert, Anthony Hood, James Barnacastle, John Howell, Jennifer Alred, Pam Horton, Sherry England, James Alexander, Dean Parks, Harvey Blankenship, Janice Barrett, Ruth Ann McAbee, Patrica Alexander, Wayne and Patty White, Roger Roberston, Marsha Roberston, Sara Johnson, Jay Moore, Randy Campbell, Neal Johnson, Chuck Byrd, Linda and Joe Grgiwski, Jody Buttram, Anne Liddell and others who did not sign in.

Power Point Presentation available by contacting jera.cochran at usda.gov.

Bankhead District Ranger Andy Scott provided a history of the Bankhead Liaison Panel and its function in collaboration and communication with the public.

Next panel meeting – Forest Service will contact representatives from each organization represented and determine if another representative is needed due to retirements, etc. Panel membership is determined by consensus.

Andy introduced his staff, panel members present and new employees.

Dr. Stacy Clark, Forest Service Southern Research Station presented a program on American chestnut and her long-term research study on chestnut restoration. Visit <https://www.fs.usda.gov/research/srs/products/compasslive/chestnut-management-ecology-across-globe> to learn more about chestnut management and ecology.

Questions included –

Q: Are there wild chestnuts in Bankhead? A: Yes, they are out there. General Land Office (GLO) notes mention them.

Q: Mr. Hood met with Jamie Van Clief, today and assisted with chestnut harvesting at The American Chestnut Foundation's (TACF) research station in North Ala. They discussed Phytophthora root rot. Two research stations that have lost their entire chestnut research due to root rot, apparently prevalent. Q: - Is that a hindrance to the transgenic trees, as well? A: Yes, it will be a hindrance. They are examining root rot resistance in TACF transgenic trees, but blight-resistance and root-rot resistance are on different genes. Well- drained soils with less clay is critical, as the root rot is a water mold. Restoration in the Piedmont, for example, would not be possible. For the same reason that shortleaf pine doesn't grow well in Piedmont and succumbs to little leaf/phytophthora). Success will come down to selecting best sites.

Q: Regarding the genetically modified organism (GMO) or transgenic trees – they may not be approved. The Food and Drug Association (FDA) says it's a fungicide type tree, which will incur more restrictions on approval. A: USDA, FDA and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) all have to weigh in on approval – looking at it as a fungicide (FDA).

District Ranger Scott introduced Patti Campbell with the Argonne National Lab (ANL) who will present at the next meeting. Argonne has a Special Use Permit for a new [Atmospheric Radiation Measurement \(ARM\)](#) research facility on Bankhead with three supplemental sites outside the Bankhead. They hope to have it up and running before January. Flyers about the project available were available in the room.

ORA Tyler Fish presented the Recreation Fee Increase Proposal – Currently in public comment period until October 31st. Proposal to increase day use fees at some sites from \$3-\$5. Camping fees from \$5-\$15 at Brushy Lake and Owl Creek. Owl Creek rider fee - \$10/rider for all horse trails. Same for Flint Creek. New \$5/person permit at Hurricane Creek shooting range. New fee at Natural Bridge - \$5/vehicle.

This is a fee proposal. It has not been accepted. It is now in [public comment period](#).

Many members of the public and Backcountry Horsemen of Alabama asked questions and provided comments on the proposal. BCHA does not support the proposal and will submit comments.

Questions

Q: Who made the proposal/proposed the numbers? A: Bankhead staff locally. These may not be the numbers that get approved.

Q: What is considered before the proposal is submitted? Demographics, per capita income? A: Staff looks at surrounding area, similar sites and charges, must stay within a certain % of those other sites, for example other nearby campgrounds.

Q: Actual decision making? Who is the committee who makes the decision? Is it the NF in Alabama Resource Allocation Committee (RAC) that handles the Secure Rural Schools funds? A: We believe it's a nationwide RAC committee. The final decision is not local. This is something that is happening all over the nation at this time and reviewed by a national panel. This has been ongoing for at least 8 or more years.

Multiple questions and scenarios were presented on costs, not in support of the increase. Questions about why Talladega fee proposal is different than Bankhead on horseback riding. Questions about other forests in Alabama having fee proposals. A: Our proposal is different than Warden Station on Talladega. Bankhead's is specific to the trail, so that we can put more money/get more work done to the trail itself. The trail fee allows for work on the trail itself. Yes, all forests in Alabama have a fee increase proposal.

A: Tonight we can clarify questions and provide answers. Comments need to be submitted to the appropriate folks at

<https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=2275a13c77024ed3890be708c91f400>

Q: Fees collected – where does the funding going? All fee money goes into a general fund (NFs in AL) and is reallocated. Owl Creek and Pine Torch Day Use fees doesn't go to the trails. This trail rider fee will allow us to use fee money on the trail. Currently Bankhead doesn't have that option to use fee money on trail maintenance.

Q: How much of the fees come back to Bankhead? A: We don't have information on the percentage of where the fees go when they are reallocated to the Districts.

Q: No email has been sent out on this proposal to the Bankhead mailing list requesting opportunity to comment. Fliers are posted and proposal is on state website. Curious why it hasn't been sent out. A: We can't speak to the forest's outreach strategy.

Comment/Request: Public would like to see an email out on this before the comment period closes.

(Update: Ranger Scott emailed the link to the panel on Sept. 29)

Q: Yearly pass increase? Will it cover riding and day use? A: \$50/year – Covers riding, day use. Per person for riding.

Q: Senior pass? How will that work? A: Yes, senior pass applies as it does now.

Ranger Scott provided updates on 2023 accomplishments and 2024 plans for the prescribed burning and timber sale program. Visitors can view a live map on planned and accomplished prescribed burns at this link:

<https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b196b5958480421fa7b5ee2a6ce91d31>

Silviculturist Jason Harris provided updates on 2023 accomplishments with tree planting, an experimental oak tree planting at Balls Mountain with partners and the non-native invasive plant treatments to date.

ORA Tyler Fish provided updates on installation of new fee collection structures and new interpretive signs at the Natural Bridge recreation area.

Wildlife Biologist Allison Cochran provided updates on 2023 accomplishments including wild pig control, wildlife opening management, litter clean-ups and rare species monitoring and cooperative research projects. Visitors can view a map of managed wildlife openings at this link:

<https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=febc30e1a64344c1b20965e0bb0a9910>

Ranger Scott provided additional updates.

National Public Lands Day was a successful partnership led by Wild Alabama to clean up tons of trash along Highway 33.

Sipsey and Thompson bridges have been approved for funding to replace damaged bridges.

Secure Rural Schools funds - RAC committee has reviewed proposals and announced funding for the following:

Winston and Lawrence counties will receive funds for cooperative road work.

Winston and Lawrence counties will also receive funds for trail crews for the Legacy Trail Program that Wild Alabama kicked off.

Wild Alabama also got a proposal funded for trail and wilderness stewardship and maintenance.

Update on roads – Bankhead roads have been in bad shape for a number of years. The District staff have worked on roads all year, culvert cleaning, etc with over 700 culverts cleaned. Excessive storms since April has resulted in clearing of over 800 trees. Additionally, the District has begun roadside mowing. The National Forests in Alabama's Roads Strike Team has been grading roads for the last three or four weeks, including Flint Creek road, Owl Creek, Inmanfield, Hickory Grove, and roads around the Wilderness. While we still need work, good progress has been made. Have gotten equipment and folks trained on the National Forest to do this work. We did purchase some gravel for some sites, as much as we had allocations to buy. The public gave input that we need more gravel to go on roads. They also commented that bringing in a packer made a tremendous difference. The public shared their appreciation for the work to repair the roads.

Q: Fee proposal question – is this across the state? A: Yes, this is for federal National Forest only, for the National Forests in Alabama, not state parks, etc. Q: Once the decision is made, will the fees be the same for all national forests? A: No, it may be different on different forests. Will likely be similar, but don't know what final fees will be.

Kim Waites with [Wild Alabama](#) is seeking volunteers to scout all trails in Wilderness area for next couple of weeks and training folks in trail scouting and maintenance. She is also a crosscut sawyer instructor and happy to give classes to interested groups or individuals. She is also aware of opportunities for funding for backcountry for first aid, etc. Contact Kim if want to help scout trails or for more information.

Kerry Steedly – NW Regional Cooperative Extension Agent – Thank the Forest Service for cooperation, state staff training, career day for Lawrence and Winston county students, etc. On October 11, there's an Invasive Plant ID and Control workshop in Double Springs. The workshop is free and includes lunch. The morning is a classroom training and the afternoon includes a field trip to Bankhead.

This Saturday North Alabama Trails and Rec Expo is in Decatur.

James Alexander – BCHA – reminded members that CPR/First aid have lapsed and those are required for any crosscut or chainsaw work as volunteers.

The Bankhead Fishing Derby was held again this year and FAWN program coming up in October in Winston County.

National Wild Turkey Federation awarded Bankhead superfund grants in 2022 and 2023 for invasive plant control and other projects.