



**Forest Service**

**Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests**

**July 2016**



# **Areas Proposed for Analysis in the Forest Plan DEIS by Alternative**

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## Summary

This document describes potential wilderness recommendations that will be analyzed as part of the alternatives under consideration for the revised Nantahala and Pisgah NFs Land Management Plan (Forest Plan).

## Introduction

The Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests are in the required process of revising the forest plan. Part of the revision process includes identifying and evaluating lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System and determining whether to recommend any such lands for wilderness designation. A description of this process can be found in the 2012 Forest Service Planning Rule and Chapter 70 of the Forest Service Land Management Planning Handbook 1909.12. This process includes the following four steps:

1. Identify and **inventory** all lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System
2. **Evaluate** the wilderness characteristics of each area based on a given set of criteria
3. Determine which areas to further **analyze** in the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) as part of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process
4. Decide which areas, if any, to **recommend** for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

As the deciding official, the Forest Supervisor makes a final decision on which areas to recommend for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System when he signs the forest plan. If any areas are recommended in Step 4, these are only preliminary administrative recommendations; Congress has reserved the authority to make final decisions on wilderness designation.

Areas recommended as wilderness in the forest plan will be managed to maintain their wilderness characteristics. Areas will remain recommended wilderness<sup>1</sup> or Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs)<sup>2</sup> until Congress acts to designate them as wilderness<sup>3</sup>. Areas that are not recommended for wilderness will be available for inclusion in other management areas in the forest plan.

The inventory (Step 1) is intended to be broad and inclusive, including all areas across the forest that meet certain size, roads and improvements criteria. On the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs,

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<sup>1</sup> "Recommended wilderness" includes locations that the Forest Service identifies in the Forest Plan Record of Decision as areas that should be considered by the Secretary of Agriculture and Congress for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. These administrative recommendations can be reviewed by the Forest Service, and updated if needed, in each plan revision.

<sup>2</sup> "Wilderness Study Areas" are locations identified by Congress in public law. During forest planning, the Forest Service is asked to review these areas for their suitability as wilderness. Regardless of whether these areas are recommended by the Forest Service in a Forest Plan, these areas remain as Wilderness Study Areas until Congress takes action to either designate them as wilderness or release this status.

<sup>3</sup> "Designated wilderness" includes those locations on the Forest where Congress has identified that the lands will be managed as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. These designations are Congressional and thus are not being re-evaluated as part of plan revision.

364,818 acres met the criteria for the inventory phase. Inclusion in the inventory is not a designation that conveys or requires a particular kind of management.

As required by Forest Service planning policy, all areas included in the inventory were evaluated for their wilderness characteristics (Step 2). The wilderness evaluation process is described in the Forest Service Handbook 1909.12, chapter 70. It defines criteria that the forest used to evaluate areas for wilderness characteristics, such as apparent naturalness, opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, unique features, and ability to manage to preserve wilderness characteristics. Public comments, geospatial analysis, and Forest Service knowledge of areas was used to inform the identification of areas or portions of areas that have wilderness characteristics.

As part of the wilderness evaluation process, many inventory area boundaries were adjusted to better reflect wilderness characteristics identified in the evaluation. For example, boundaries were redrawn to exclude impacts to naturalness such as ongoing wildlife habitat management (maintained wildlife fields, linear wildlife openings), or recent vegetation management. Refined boundaries also delineate areas that better reflect opportunities for solitude or primitive or unconfined recreation. Updated area maps that show both the Fall 2015 and adjusted boundary can be found in either the Evaluation Report or in an interactive map [on our website](#).

The evaluation phase concludes with a report ([located on our website](#)) that describes the wilderness characteristics of each area from the inventory. Not all lands included in the inventory and subsequent evaluations are required to be carried forward into Step 3, analysis in the Environmental Impact Statement (FSH 1909.12 § 73). Based on the results from the evaluation and input from public, some areas or portions of evaluation areas may be excluded from further analysis. The remainder of this document describes how the Forest Service used the results from step 2 to select which areas to analyze in step 3.

For Step 3, selected potential recommended wilderness areas are carried forward into one or more alternatives that will be analyzed in an environmental impact statement in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. The analysis will consider the effect of recommended wilderness on other forest resources.

A final decision on which areas will be included in the DEIS has not yet been made. The initial list of areas to analyze described here may be further adjusted prior to releasing a formal draft plan. As with all of our draft pieces of the plan, we are looking for public feedback on the areas we are considering for further analysis. There will be additional opportunities to provide input on the range of alternatives, including recommended wildernesses, during the comment period for the DEIS.

## Existing Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas

Existing Wilderness designations are areas where Congress has identified that the lands will be managed as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. These areas are not affected by this analysis and will not be changing as part of the forest plan revision. The existing wildernesses on the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs are:

- Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness
- Ellicott Rock Wilderness
- Southern Nantahala Wilderness
- Shining Rock Wilderness
- Middle Prong Wilderness
- Linville Gorge Wilderness

In 1984, Congress designated five Wilderness Study Areas on the Forest:

- Craggy Wilderness Study Area
- Harper's Creek Wilderness Study Area
- Lost Cove Wilderness Study Area
- Overflow Creek Wilderness Study Area
- Snowbird Wilderness Study Area

During forest planning, the Forest Service is asked to review these areas for their suitability as wilderness. The current forest plan recommended that three of these WSAs be designated as wilderness: Craggy, Harper's Creek and Lost Cove; however there has been no action by Congress. The Forest Service has been managing all five of these designated WSAs to maintain wilderness characteristics since their designation. Regardless of whether these areas are recommended by the Forest Service in the revised Forest Plan, these areas remain WSAs until Congress takes action to either designate them as wilderness or releases them from WSA status.

## Moving from Evaluation (Step 2) to Analysis (Step 3)

The draft environmental impact statement for the revised forest plan will analyze a range of plan alternatives that are responsive to the June 2014 Need for Change as well as input provided through public involvement. Based on input from public participation and the wilderness evaluation results, the Forest Service has identified specific areas to analyze as recommended wilderness in one or more plan alternatives.

Public opinions vary widely on the issue of special area designation, specifically recommendations for wilderness. Comments received range from recommending all areas in the inventory as wilderness to recommending no wilderness areas, including those currently designated as WSAs.

Areas, or portions of areas that were found to have wilderness characteristics and that respond to the key issues identified through public involvement, are included in one or more alternatives and will be analyzed for management trade-offs in the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS). The proposed range of alternatives for wilderness recommendation is described below.

All of these proposals would enable the revised forest plan to meet its intended goals to enhance and restore resiliency, provide clean and abundant water, and connect communities to the land. These recommendations would not preclude Forest Service from increasing the pace and scale of restoration under any alternative. Some areas were intentionally left out of alternative combinations because the public expressed a desire for other management in these areas, including mountain biking and motorized travel.

While wilderness is the focus of this document, wilderness is not the only resource that will vary among alternatives. Alternatives will be further developed prior to the release of the DEIS and will vary by other management area allocations and resource management in addition to the range of wilderness recommendations described below.

### **Alternative A – No Action Alternative, Current 1994 Plan, as amended**

There are six existing wildernesses on the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs, totaling 66,337 acres. The current Forest Plan has five WSAs, three of which are recommended for wilderness. As the no action alternative, no new wildernesses are recommended for designation in this alternative. Existing recommendations for Craggy, Harper Creek and Lost Cove WSAs are carried forward in this alternative.

### **Alternative B**

This alternative aims to balance the interests of those who desire more wilderness acreage on the forest with those who would like no more designated wilderness areas, by focusing on improving the condition and integrity of areas that are currently managed as wilderness (designated wilderness and WSAs). Recommending extensions to existing wilderness or WSAs (i.e. Craggy), would enhance the quality of the wilderness values by increasing the size of the core area, improving the manageability of boundaries, and preserving wilderness characteristics where they exist on National Forest lands adjacent to designated wilderness. Areas included in Alternative B were found to have the strongest wilderness characteristics of all those we evaluated.

As part of this alternative, nine areas are recommended as extensions to four existing wildernesses (providing additional acreage to areas that are already designated): Southern Nantahala, Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock, Middle Prong, and Shining Rock. Four existing WSAs are recommended (one more than the current plan): Craggy, Lost Cove, Harper Creek and Snowbird. Snowbird WSA has been managed to maintain its wilderness characteristics since 1984. Also recommended is an extension to Craggy WSA.

### **Alternative C**

Alternative C responds to the public desire for more areas and acres of wilderness. In many cases, inventory area boundaries were redrawn to better reflect the portions of areas with the strongest wilderness characteristics. Areas identified exclusively in Alternative C have some wilderness characteristics, but not as strong as those in Alternative B. Areas in Alternative C could potentially have more effects on management of other resources than those areas in Alternative B. An analysis of management tradeoffs in this alternative will help inform the Forest Supervisor's decision.

Alternative C includes the same extensions to wilderness that are included in Alternative B, as well as extensions to Ellicott Rock Wilderness and Linville Gorge Wilderness. Additionally,

portions of four inventory areas are new recommendations for wilderness: Mackey Mountain, Tusquitee Bald, Bald Mountain, and Black Mountains. Portions of Cantrell Top and Unicoi Mountains are included in this alternative as extensions to the proposed Upper Bald River Wilderness in Tennessee (Cherokee NF).

Four existing WSAs are also recommended (one more than the current plan): Craggy, Lost Cove, Harper Creek and Snowbird. Snowbird WSA has been managed to maintain its wilderness characteristics since designation as a WSA in 1984. Also recommended is an extension to Craggy WSA.

### **Alternative D**

Alternative D responds to the public that expressed opposition to any recommended wildernesses. This alternative does not include any additional recommendations for wilderness. It does carry forward the recommendations included in the existing Forest Plan for Lost Cove, Harper Creek, and Craggy Wilderness Study Areas.

## **Additional Considerations**

While all inventory areas were evaluated, not all areas are carried forward for further analysis in an alternative. Whether an area was carried forward in one or more alternatives was based on the evaluation of wilderness characteristics, the theme of the alternatives, and information received from the public. Areas were excluded if they were evaluated as not having wilderness characteristics, or public comments recommended these areas for different management such that the areas would not be consistent with the themes of the alternatives described above. Table 3 lists those areas that are not included in an alternative.

While public comments expressed a range from recommending all areas in the inventory as wilderness to recommending no wilderness areas, neither of these poles is reflected in the initial alternatives above. The Forest Service determined that it would be inconsistent with the wilderness evaluation process to consider the complete inventory in an alternative. Also, the Forest Service did not propose an alternative that would recommend zero acres for wilderness, given that there are three WSAs recommended in the current plan which have been managed to retain their wilderness characteristics since 1984.

Table 1 provides an overview of acres of designated wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, and potential recommended wilderness by alternative. Alternative A is the current Forest Plan for the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs and represents the no-action alternative for the analysis. Existing WSAs would continue to be managed to maintain wilderness characteristics and three of the five WSAs would be recommended. Alternatives B, C, and D represent the range of action alternatives that will be analyzed in the draft environmental impact statement. Under Alternatives B, C, and D, the existing WSAs would also remain. The Forest Service has been managing all five of these designated WSAs to maintain wilderness characteristics since their designation and will continue to manage these areas as WSAs until Congress either designates them as wilderness or releases them from WSA status.

Table 1. Overview of Designated Wilderness and Potential Recommendations Across Alternatives

	<b>Measurement (Acres)</b>	<b>Alternative A</b>	<b>Alternative B</b>	<b>Alternative C</b>	<b>Alternative D</b>
1	Existing designated wilderness	66,337	66,337	66,337	66,337
2	Existing Wilderness Study Areas	27,097	27,097	27,097	27,097
3	Wilderness Study Areas that would be recommended for wilderness	15,321	23,773	23,773	15,321
4	New acres being analyzed for wilderness recommendations	0	14,457	63,285	0
5	Potential recommended wilderness (row 3 + row 4)	15,321	38,230	87,058	15,321
6	Total combined designated wilderness, existing WSAs and new acres being analyzed for wilderness (row 1 + row 2 + row 4)	93,434	107,891	156,719	93,434
7	Total combined designated wilderness, existing WSAs and new acres being analyzed for wilderness as percentage of total forest acres*	9%	10%	16%	9%

\* Based on total forest acres as of 2015 – 1,041,582 acres

Table 2 lists all areas that are included in the proposed range of alternatives. Areas included in Alternative B are either existing WSAs or extensions to existing wilderness and WSAs. As described above, most of the areas listed on Table 2 have had their boundaries refined. The adjusted acres can be seen by comparing Total Acres Evaluated to Alternative Acres. The acres that were removed by boundary refinements will not be analyzed in the DEIS.

Table 2. Potential wilderness recommendations under consideration for inclusion in Alternative B, C, and/or D of the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS).

Area Name	Extension to Existing Wilderness and WSAs <sup>1</sup>	Total Acres Evaluated	Acres Under Consideration for Potential Recommended Wilderness		
			Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D
Craggy	Craggy WSA	10,653	3,450 <sup>2</sup>	3,450 <sup>2</sup>	2,578 <sup>3</sup>
Harper Creek WSA	--	7,457	7,042	7,042	7,042
Lost Cove WSA	--	5,934	5,701	5,701	5,701
Snowbird WSA	--	11,560	8,452	8,452	0
Barkers Creek	S. Nant	1,556	991	991	0
Cherry Cove	S. Nant	1,159	0	842	0
Chunky Gal	S. Nant	7,785	3,774	3,774	0
Sharptop Ridge <sup>4</sup> (Ext)	S. Nant	NA	0	634	0
Southern Nantahala Ext	S. Nant	4,298	1,207	1,207	0
Joyce Kilmer Slickrock Ext 2, Deep Creek/Avery Creek	JKS	2,313	2,313	2,313	0
Joyce Kilmer Slickrock Ext 4	JKS	326	326	326	0
Joyce Kilmer Slickrock Ext 3, Yellowhammer Branch	JKS	1,207	1,279	1,279	0
Ellicott Rock West Ext	ER	824	0	561	0
Graveyard Ridge (Ext)	ShRock	2,339	914	914	0
Sam Knob (Ext)	ShRock	2,629	910	910	0
Middle Prong Ext	MP	6,676	1,871	1,871	0
Linville Gorge Ext	Linville	2,844	0	2,856	0
Mackey Mountain	--	14,985	0	7,355	0
Bald Mountain	--	11,616	0	11,409	0
Black Mountains	--	12,473	0	11,447	0
Cantrell Top	UB WSA	3,664	0	1,580	0
Tusquitee Bald	--	29,156	0	8,389	0
Unicoi/Upper Bald River	UB WSA	8,952	0	3,755	0
			<b>38,230</b>	<b>87,058</b>	<b>15,321</b>
Net change in recommended acres			<b>22,909</b>	<b>71,737</b>	<b>0</b>

<sup>1</sup>Existing wilderness: S. Nant – Southern Nantahala; JKS – Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock; Linville – Linville Gorge; MP – Middle Prong; ShRock – Shining Rock; UB – Upper Bald WSA on the Cherokee NF

<sup>2</sup>Total acreage includes the existing Craggy WSA as well as an extension to the area.

<sup>3</sup>This acreage is the existing Craggy WSA.

<sup>4</sup>Sharptop Ridge was previously part of the Chunky Gal inventory area but is included here as a separate area.

Table 3. Inventory areas currently not under consideration for potential recommended wilderness in any alternative in the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS).

<b>Area Name</b>	<b>Total Acres Evaluated</b>
Ash Cove	5,885
Bearwallow	4,131
Boteler Peak	10,524
Cedar Rock Mountain	8,682
Cheoah Bald	9,400
Daniel Ridge	11,695
Deerpark Mountain (previously named Bluff Mtn)	3,314
Dobson Knob	11,763
Fishhawk Mountain	5,670
Harper Creek Ext, Sugar Knob	6,175
Highlands of Roan	5,217
Jarrett Creek	8,972
Joyce Kilmer Slickrock Ext 1	3,554
Laurel Mountain	10,946
Linville Pinnacle Ext	620
Nolichucky Gorge	2,465
Overflow Creek <sup>1</sup>	3,901
Panthertown Valley	4,395
Piercy Mountain Range	9,109
Pigeon River	5,999
Santeetlah Headwaters	4,448
Siler Bald	6,280
Slide Hollow	199
South Mills River	17,105
Steels Creek	5,841
Tellico Bald	12,525
Terrapin Mountain	5,441
Upper Wilson Creek	6,373
Wesser Bald	6,642
Woods Mountain	12,701
Yellow Creek Mountains	4,445
<b>Total</b>	<b>214,417</b>

<sup>1</sup>Overflow Creek is an existing Wilderness Study Area.