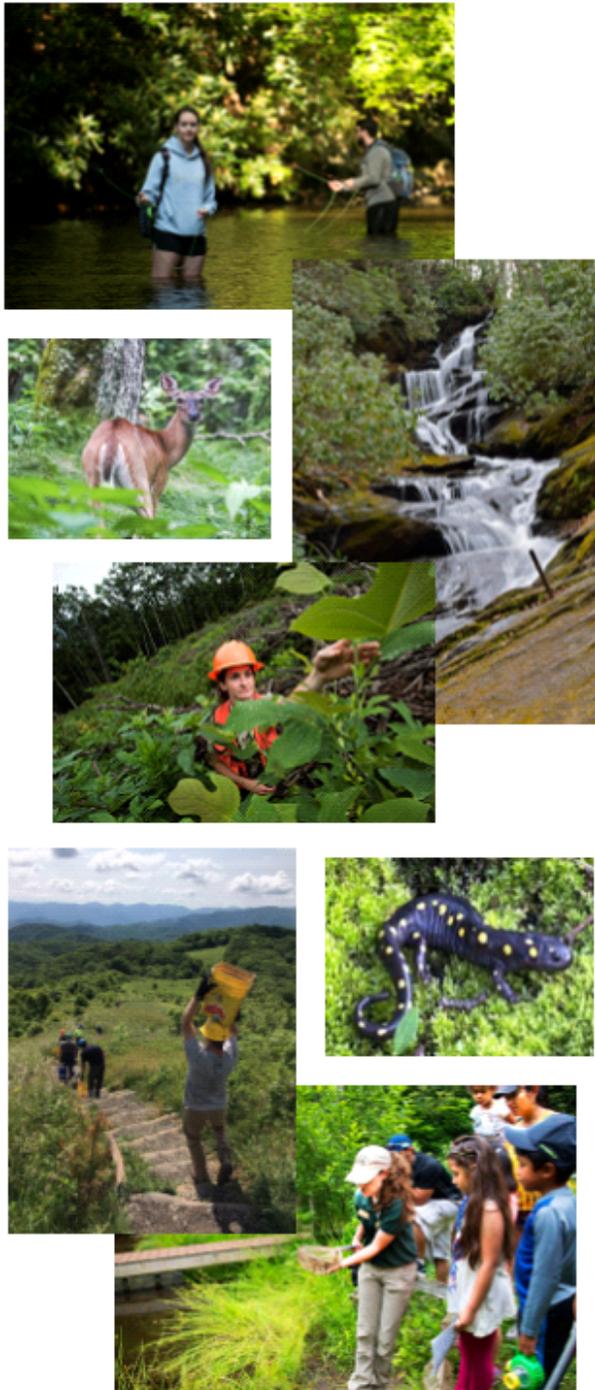


# Nantahala and Pisgah Forest Plan Revision Reader's Guide

USDA



*Greetings forest user,*

The U.S. Forest Service is releasing a proposed plan for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. The forest plan provides a strategic framework for managing the Forests over the next 10-15 years. The plan includes desired conditions that describe what we want the Forests to be in the future and objectives that describe actions the Forest Service will take.

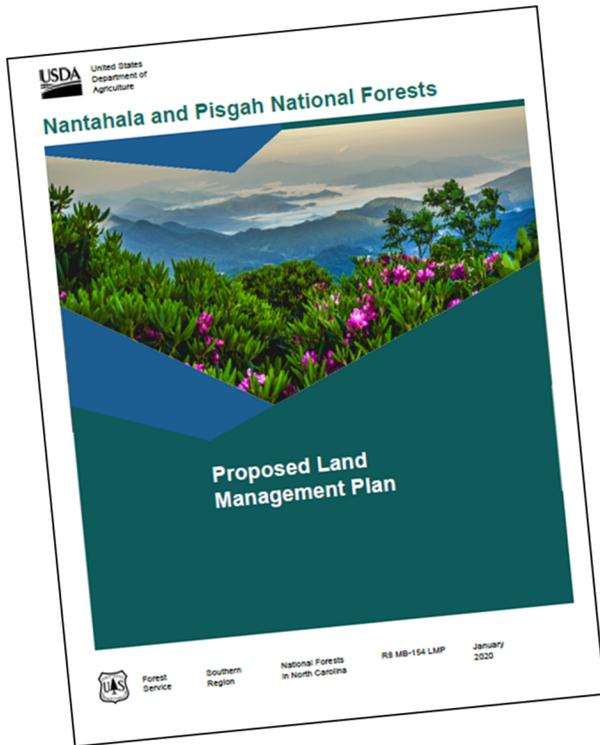
In addition, we are releasing an environmental analysis of four approaches or “alternatives” we could take to implement the forest plan. This Reader’s Guide provides an overview of the forest plan with reference to the alternatives.

We have worked with diverse members of the public to build a broadly supported and implementable forest plan that will connect people to the land; restore forest resiliency, forest health, and wildlife habitat; provide clean and abundant water; support recreation and local jobs; and provide a platform for working together toward shared goals.

With the release of the proposed forest plan, a 90-day comment period begins. We seek input on how to refine the plan. We encourage you to reach out to organizations who have been involved in the process and that represent your interests to see how your interests have been incorporated. See the last page for how to share your comments with us.

*-The Nantahala and Pisgah Plan Revision Team  
February 2020*

## What documents are now available?



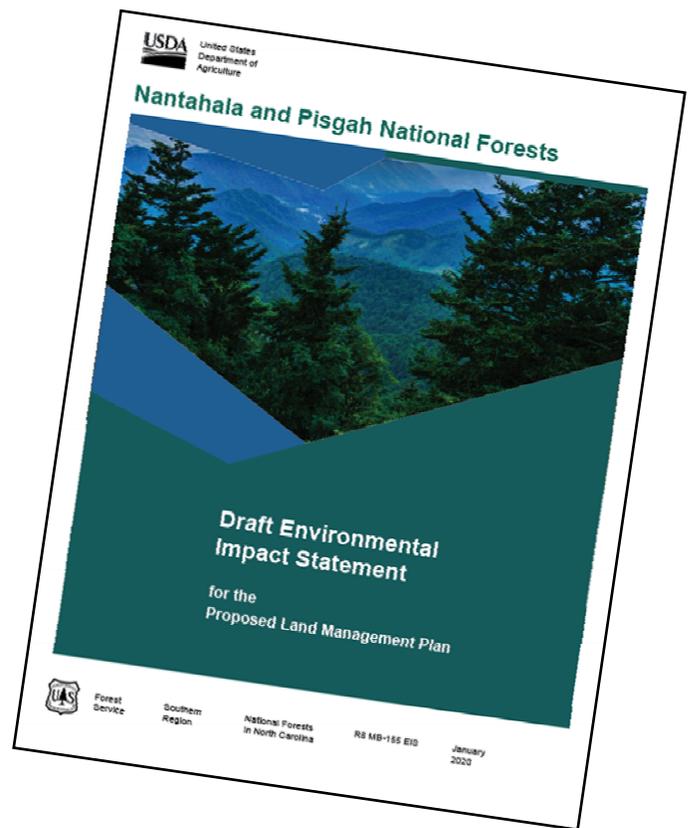
The proposed land management plan, or **proposed forest plan**, establishes a vision for how the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests will be managed for the next 10 to 15 years, and establishes the strategic framework for achieving that vision. All future projects, everything from trail building to tree harvesting and stream restoration, will have to be consistent with the forest plan.

The plan includes: desired conditions, that describe what we want forest resources to be like in the future and objectives, the measurable steps we will take in the next decade to achieve those longterm goals. The plan also includes a set of maps that show where plan direction will be applied across the forest.

At this stage, the plan is called a “proposed” plan because it is a draft available for public comment. Comments received during this 90 day comment period will shape the final plan.

The **draft environmental impact statement (DEIS)** describes and analyzes in detail the effects of the proposed plan on the physical, biological, and social resources of the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests.

The DEIS includes 4 proposed plan alternatives, which differ in their methods for managing vegetation patterns and wildlife habitat, special designations, access, sustainable recreation, and economic contributions of the forests, and helps inform the decision about the final plan.



*This Readers Guide provides information about the contents of these documents and their appendices, and directs readers to sections that may be of interest to take a closer look.... Look for this book icon for tips on which sections to read for more information.*

## What will the proposed plan do?

### The Proposed Plan will:

- ◇ **Recognize and contribute to multiple uses of the Forest Service mission** including timber harvest, recreation, wildlife, water and wilderness.
- ◇ **Improve forest health and resiliency.** increase the pace and scale of restoration above current levels; maintain and improve the diversity of forest vegetation especially young forest, open forest, and old growth conditions; increase management activity using silviculture and fire as tools; and control invasive species.
- ◇ **Improve or maintain wildlife habitat conditions** for the wildlife species that depend on the forest, including federally-listed species and species of conservation concern, rare and unique habitats, resident and migrant game species, pollinators, birds, bats, fish, and more.
- ◇ **Contribute to clean and abundant water** by sustaining surface water and groundwater flows, protect water quality, maintain fish and wildlife habitat, control erosion, restore streams and streamside zones, and continue to sustain forests as a source of drinking water to communities in Western NC.
- ◇ **Improve the Forests' world class recreation opportunities** for year-round outdoor play and exercise. The plan will provide for both developed and dispersed recreation on land and water, from an outdoor multiple use trail system to indoor facilities, ensuring opportunities and sites are sustainable.
- ◇ **Enable forest access**, including for hunting, fishing and gathering of forest products, as well as providing for the needs of Federally recognized Tribes.
- ◇ **Contribute to local economies** by collaboratively providing resources, improvements to infrastructure, sustainable levels of renewable forest commodities that contribute to local businesses, tourism, and sustainable community growth.
- ◇ **Sustain the Forests' scenic beauty and cultural resources**, enabling the forest to remain a destination for spiritual renewal and connecting to our shared history.
- ◇ **Continue to manage existing administrative and Congressionally designated areas which will not be changed during revision.** These areas include:
  - National Scenic & Historic Trails, such as the Appalachian Trail and the Trail of Tears*
  - Congressionally designated Wilderness*
  - Wilderness Study Areas*
  - Wild & Scenic Rivers*
  - Inventoried Roadless Areas*
  - Wilderness Study Areas*
  - Experimental Forests*
  - Research Natural Areas*
  - Cradle of Forestry Historic Site*
- ◇ **Recommend land allocations in the following three areas :**
  - Recommended Wilderness*
  - Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers*
  - Special Interest Areas*
- ◇ **Recognize the value of partners in shaping our shared future**, identify how other agencies, government and non-government partners, volunteers and visitors contribute to sustaining these National Forests, and will identify and help facilitate additional opportunities to work together for shared goals.
- ◇ **Be inclusive of input from the public, governments, Federally Recognized Tribes, and best available science.** The plan is developed with input from the public and future planning and projects will be undertaken in collaboration with the public. The Forest Service will continue to collaborate with the public on implementing the revised plan.

**The Proposed Plan will not:** Decide the future of a particular trail, road, recreation site, or project design; make any leasing decisions about oil and gas resources; or authorize activities to take place on the forest. (All future projects must be analyzed prior to implementation).

## How is the proposed plan different from the current plan?

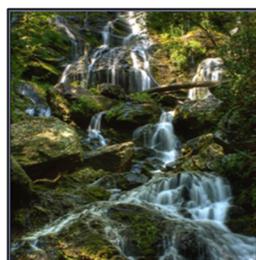
The plan is built around 4 themes that serve as the basis for all management direction:



Connecting  
People to  
the Land



Sustaining  
Healthy  
Ecosystems



Providing  
Clean and  
Abundant  
Water



Partnering  
with Others

The revised plan will be poised to accelerate the achievement of shared goals:

- It establishes a clear vision for each ecological community on the forest.
- It identifies an additional tier of work beyond current Forest Service capacity that may be accomplished with partners.
- It places greater emphasis on the places and uses important to people.
- The alternatives were designed based on shared values we heard from our partners and the public to offer win-win solutions and minimize polarization.

Here are some examples of proposed shifts in management outlined by the proposed plan:

**Ecosystem-based approach:** Unlike the previous plan that framed activities in terms of outputs and traditional standards and guidelines, the revised plan developed desired conditions for each ecological community. The forest developed a model of the natural range of variation and analyzed departure from that range, developing desired conditions for each ecozone. By using ecological communities, projects will consider needs across a broader landscape, improving restoration efforts for ecosystems and the wildlife that depend on them.

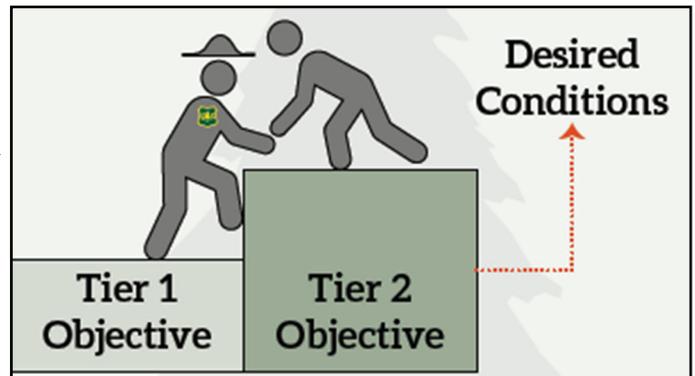
**Recognizing the importance of place:** The revised plan places a much greater emphasis on the way people use the forest - the places and uses that are important to people. The plan is divided into 12 geographic areas that outline goals for connecting people to the land in different parts of the forest, and discusses opportunities for working across boundaries with neighboring lands. This chapter reflects the interests we heard from thousands of public comments and has been well received by local governments and citizens.

**Tribal relations:** The Forest has engaged in extensive dialogue with interested tribes to ensure that traditional ecological knowledge and places of tribal significance are recognized and valued in the plan. We have coordinated with Tribes on language and desired management within the Trail of Tears Heritage Corridor.

## How is the proposed plan different from the current plan?

Here are more ways that the proposed plan differs from the current plan:

**Collaborative capacity:** The plan identifies objectives for the next 10 years at two tiers: one if existing FS capacity continues as expected levels, and a second tier if we increase capacity in the form of help from others or additional resources. By outlining what we could do with the help of others we hope to incentivize shared stewardship and build partnerships to accomplish more work.



**Local government relationships:** The Forest Supervisor and District Rangers have been meeting with county officials to discuss forest plan revision and other topics. More than 15 county meetings have occurred, as well as three meetings with Councils of Government and discussions with local congressional staff. We have reached out to counties again to share the proposed plan. The plan recognizes the value of the forest to the local economy and includes an objective to annually meet with local governments to coordinate on jobs, tourism, and public health and safety.

**Operable acres for timber:** The plan estimates the total amount of land base that is available and accessible for timber harvest over the next several decades. This analysis is more refined than analyses used in the current plan because it considers current age and condition of the forest, topography, existing and potential road access, and the constraints associated with using contemporary harvest equipment. As a result, the analysis provides a more realistic estimate of how many forest acres could be available for timber harvest, although it is still a landscape estimate.

**Addressing sustainable recreation:** The action alternatives of the plan guide construction of newly designated trails in order to address sustainability of the trail program, the desire for collaborative recreation planning and minimizing user created impacts. The approach for this varies by alternative - see alternatives section for more information. The revised plan in all action alternatives limits bicycle and horseback riding use to designated trails and roads, rather than cross country travel. These and other plan components help reduce resource impacts of trails recreation, while also considering how we can be more fiscally sustainable in managing recreation.

**Addressing old growth:** The alternatives explore different ways of providing assurance for maintaining old growth characteristics. Alternatives vary in the acres and locations managed for old growth characteristics. They also vary in the way that existing old growth is treated at the project level when it is identified.

**Unprecedented public involvement:** The planning process has involved an unprecedented amount of public engagement, which is intended to set the stage for future involvement in project design. The plan has a section on public involvement and a guideline to facilitate collaboration and meaningful public participation during preparation of integrated landscape projects.

## What does the proposed plan contain?



The proposed forest plan provides the strategic direction for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. Here's what you'll find inside:

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter briefly describes the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests in the context of surrounding public and private lands in Western North Carolina and summarizes the current condition and trends (which can be found in more detail in the 2014 Assessment report).

### **Chapter 2: Forestwide Direction**

This chapter contains the bulk of the plan direction, organized into 25 resources topics, from air to water and all the letters in between.

### **Chapter 3: Geographic Area Direction**

This chapter provides direction for the Forest's distinct landscapes, recognizing opportunities in each part of the Forest for restoration and sustainable recreation opportunities, connections to nearby communities, and opportunities for partnerships with the public, other organizations, and governments. Geographic areas contain the forestwide resources mentioned in Chapter 2.

### **Chapter 4: Management Areas**

Management areas identify places across the forest that require similar management. They outline the methods and tools the Forest Service will use to maintain National Forest System land. Management areas were identified using the principles of landscape ecology while considering the benefits the Forests provide to people.

### **Chapter 5: Monitoring and Adaptive Management**

This chapter outlines how we will monitor our progress toward our longterm goals and provides a framework to adapt our approach when needed.



Appendices provide in-depth information and are contained in separate files.

*Appendix A: Consolidated Forest Plan Objectives* identifies all the plan objectives in one spot, organized by theme—a great one-stop resource to understand the proposed plan.

*Appendix B: Timber Calculations* contains information on the planned timber sale program timber harvest levels and methods of forest vegetation management practices expected during the plan.

## Forestwide Plan Direction



The Proposed Plan's Forestwide chapter (Chapter 2) contains plan guidance that applies to the entire Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests.



### FORESTWIDE DIRECTION

Describes management for the entire forest  
Made up of Desired Conditions, Objectives,  
Standards and Guidelines, and Management  
Approaches

Think of the Forest Plan as a road through the Forest...

**DESIRED CONDITIONS** describe your destination. These are the big-picture goals. You may not get there overnight, but you know where you want to go.

**OBJECTIVES** describe the road you are driving on. These are time specific, measurable, and are the actions you take to get to your destination.

**STANDARDS** and **GUIDELINES** describe the guardrails that keep you on the road. These are the rules that you must follow.

**MANAGEMENT APPROACHES** describe the toolbox you have to make sure you get to your destination in one piece. They are optional to use, but can help along the way.

The Plan contains desired conditions, objectives, standards, guidelines and management approaches on each resource topic identified below:

- ◆ Public Involvement
- ◆ Community Connections
- ◆ Air Climate Change
- ◆ Geologic Resources
- ◆ Watershed
- ◆ Soils
- ◆ Water
- ◆ Aquatic Systems
- ◆ Streamside Zones
- ◆ Terrestrial Ecosystems
- ◆ Plant and Animal Diversity
- ◆ Fire and Fuels
- ◆ Lands and Special Uses
- ◆ Transportation and Access
- ◆ Facilities
- ◆ Recreation Settings
- ◆ Developed Recreation
- ◆ Dispersed Recreation
- ◆ Scenery
- ◆ Cultural Resources
- ◆ Tribal Resources
- ◆ Non-timber Forest Products
- ◆ Minerals and Energy
- ◆ Conservation Education & Interpretation

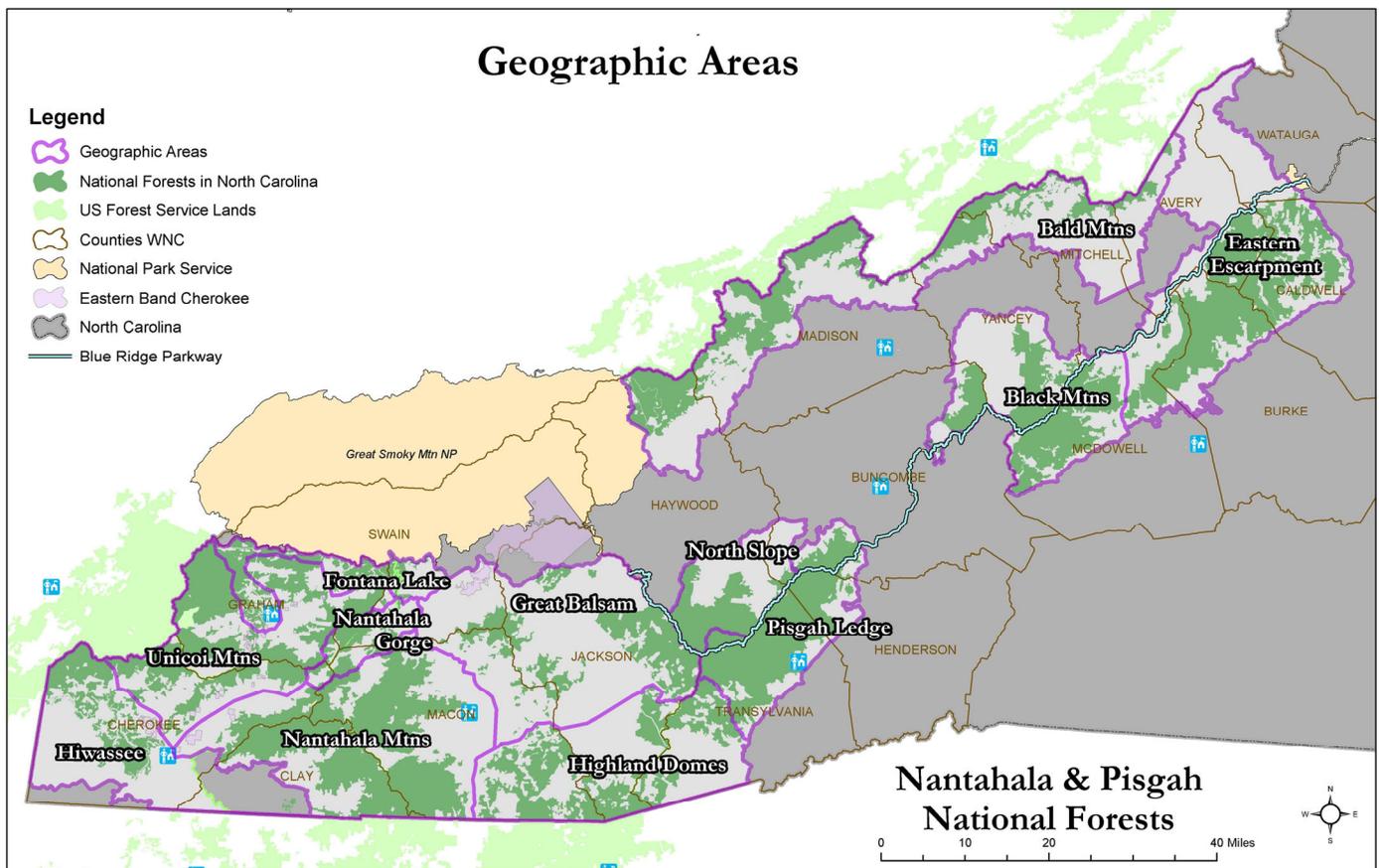
## Places Matter - Geographic Areas



The Proposed Plan's Geographic Areas chapter (Chapter 3) recognizes Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests' unique sense of place across more than 1 million acres.

By separating the Forest into distinct landscapes, the proposed plan recognizes opportunities unique to each part of the Forest, including restoration and sustainable recreation opportunities, connections to nearby communities, and opportunities for partnerships with the public, other organizations, and local governments. Geographic areas are impacted by communities and topographic elements that help define each area.

This chapter and concept was added to the plan in response to public input. Each geographic area has goals that will serve as emphases for management and were crafted with input from the public.



## What are Management Areas?



The Proposed Plans' Management Areas chapter (Chapter 4) provides direction for areas that have similar management intent and strategy, including general forest zones, and congressionally or administratively designated areas.

While the majority of forest plan direction is contained in the Forestwide Chapter, some areas of the forest have specific management needs. These areas are known as **management areas**.

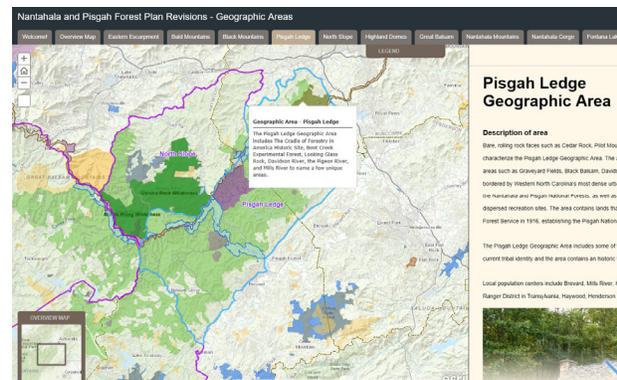
Forest management areas can be compared to city zones. However, instead of being zoned as residential, commercial, or industrial, the forests' management areas are divided into locations emphasizing different aspects of the vision established in the forest plan. For example, there is a management area that emphasizes recreation (Interface), one that emphasizes active management to improve ecosystem health and diverse wildlife habitat (Matrix), and another that emphasizes large landscapes where natural processes dominate (Backcountry). Management areas are drawn on plan maps so managers know where each emphasis applies.

When viewed as a complete forest landscape, these management areas work together to form a network of forest patches, edges, corridors, and mosaics that reflect the forest resources and the ways we manage the land.

The current forest plan has 25 numbered management areas that create unnecessary complexity. The proposed revised plan incorporates public input to decrease the number of management areas to 16 and to name them. This new approach would provide more meaningful management of those areas and reflects public interests and involvement.



The proposed plan and draft Environmental Impact Statement offer different options for how these management areas fall on the landscape. See the mapped options in DEIS Appendix I, or zoom into a location and see all four options at once using our online Storymap at: [www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision](http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision).



## What does the draft Environmental Impact Statement contain?



The draft Environmental Impact Statement analyzes the indirect effects of the plan on forest resources. Here's what you'll find inside:

### **Chapter 1: Purpose and Need for Action**

This chapter briefly describes the purpose and need for the forest plan revision and key issues that emerged from the public involvement process.

### **Chapter 2: The Proposed Action and Alternatives**

This chapter describes alternatives for the proposed plan and how the alternatives were developed to be responsive to public input. This chapter also provides a summary of the environmental consequences associated with each alternative.

### **Chapter 3: Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences**

This chapter describes the current condition of forest resources and the environmental effects of implementing the draft plan and other alternatives. The analysis is organized by physical, biological, and social and economic resource topics.

### **Chapter 4: List of Preparers and Consultation and Coordination:**

This chapter provides a list of preparers and agencies consulted during the development of the EIS.



Appendices provide in depth information about the processes, assumptions and methods used to complete the draft Environmental Impact Statement.

### **DEIS Appendices** (contained in separate files)

*Appendix A.* Response to Comments (placeholder, used in the final EIS)

*Appendix B.* Description of the Analysis Process

*Appendix C.* Ecological Sustainability Analysis

*Appendix D.* Vegetation Modeling Methods

*Appendix E.* Wilderness Evaluation Process

*Appendix F.* Wild and Scenic River Evaluation Process

*Appendix G.* Coordination with other Public Planning Efforts

*Appendix H.* Public and Government Involvement

*Appendix I.* Maps

## Forest Plan Alternatives

**Four alternative approaches to managing the Forests are presented** in the draft Environmental Impact Statement. The alternatives examine different ways that management can make progress towards multiple goals and be sensitive to special places. Alternatives were designed based on shared values we heard from our partners and publics to offer win-win solutions and minimize polarization.

Alternatives were developed with the input of states and local government, Tribes, collaborative groups, and our public. Collaborators specifically asked the Forest Service to design alternatives that would unite interests, building upon shared values, rather than send folks back to their corners to advocate for single interests. As a result, each action alternative offers something significant to gain for multiple interests. For example, in this DEIS, the alternative with the most recommended wilderness is also the alternative with the most land in active timber management, as the locations desired for these different styles of management are typically not mutually exclusive. The Forest Service believes that all of the multiple uses can be accomplished on the 1 million acre forest, doing more for all interests, without pitting interests against each other.

**Four alternatives are analyzed in detail. The Forest Service does not have a preferred alternative because we want to hear from you before we make that decision.**

**Alternative A** is the alternative that continues existing plan management direction (or the “No-Action” Alternative).

**Alternative B** has the most land available for active timber management, motorized access and recommended wilderness, and provides most flexibility to add new trails and adjust the old growth network.

**Alternative C** has the least land available for active timber management, motorized access and recommended wilderness, and instead places more land in backcountry and a new management area that emphasizes active management for species composition. This alternative adds the most restrictions on new trail development and eliminates future additions to old growth.

**Alternative D** includes a moderate amount of land available for active timber management, recommended wilderness, backcountry and the new management area that emphasizes active management for species composition. This alternative allows adjustment to the trail network and old growth network in the future, only when specific conditions are met.

**Alternatives B, C and D all contain the same level of proposed activities**, identified as Tier 1 and Tier 2 objectives. In the three places where plan direction differs between alternatives, the different plan language options are explained in the proposed plan on the appropriate page for each plan component.( ECO-S-28 on p. 70, REC-O-07 on p. 114, and REC-S-14 on p. 115).



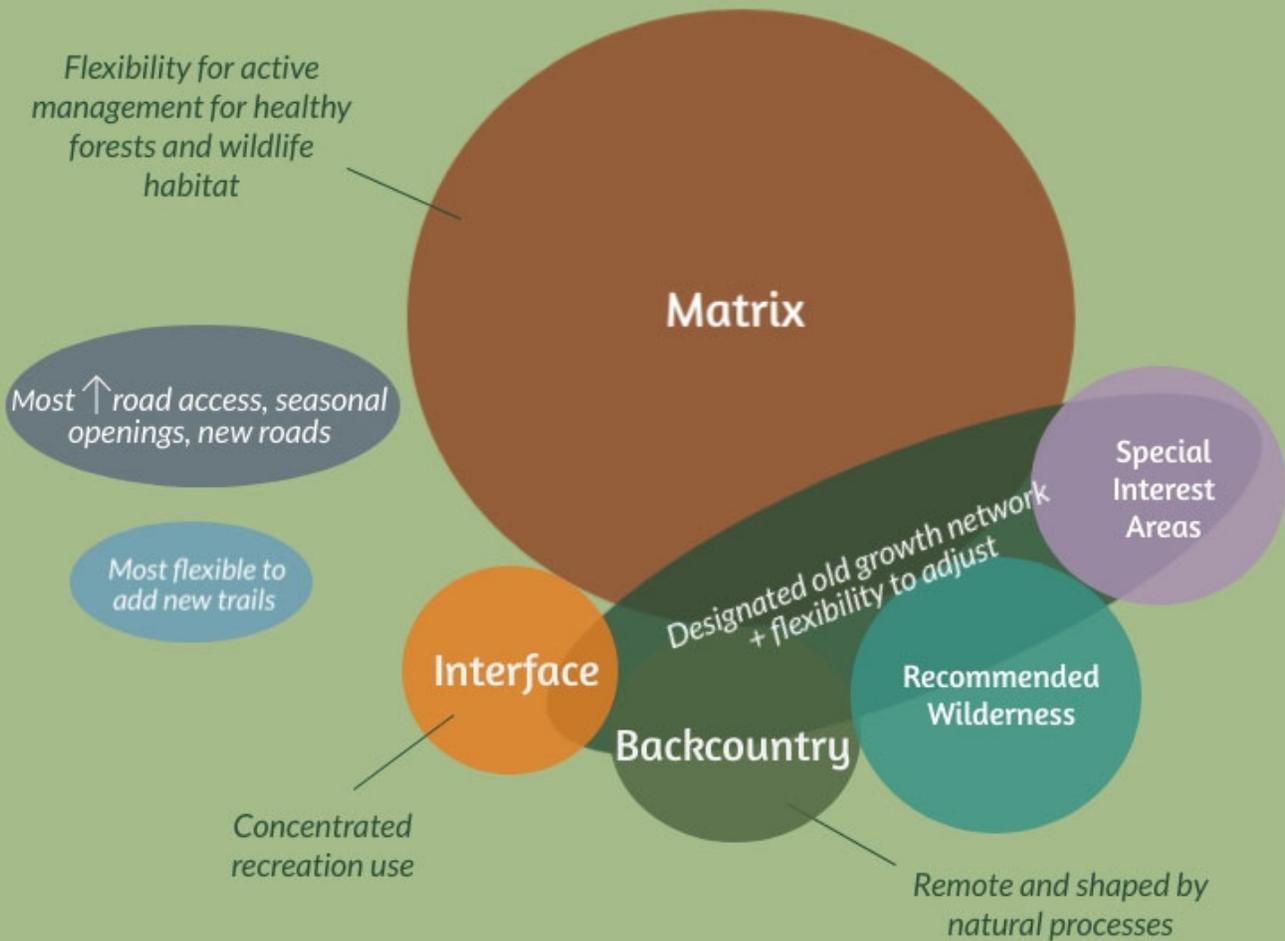
**Draft Environmental Impact Statement Chapter 2** outlines differences between the alternatives, and shows comparison tables of key metrics and how effectively alternatives meet longterm desired conditions. Alternative maps are found in **DEIS Appendix I** or see all options at once on our **online Storymap**.

# Forest Plan Action Alternatives : Alternative B

Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Proposed Land Management Plan

## Alternative B

Alternative B responds to those who desire more flexibility for managing vegetation patterns, wildlife habitats, recreation, and access.



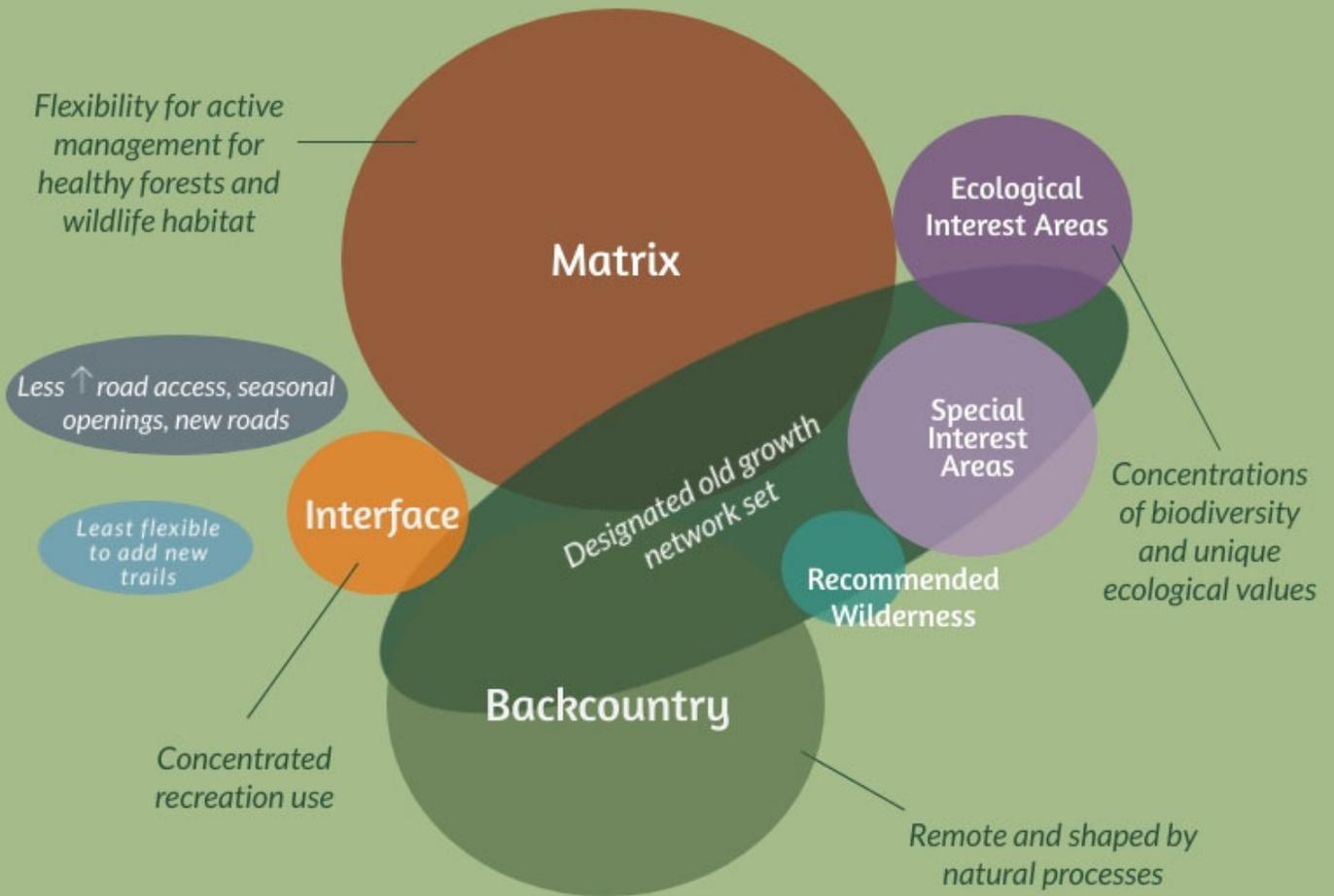
This is a simplification of some of the unique aspects of Alternative B and is not to scale.

# Forest Plan Action Alternatives : Alternative C

Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Proposed Land Management Plan

## Alternative C

Alternative C is intended to be responsive to those who desire more certainty defined in the forest plan and less project level flexibility for managing vegetation patterns, wildlife habitats, recreation and access.



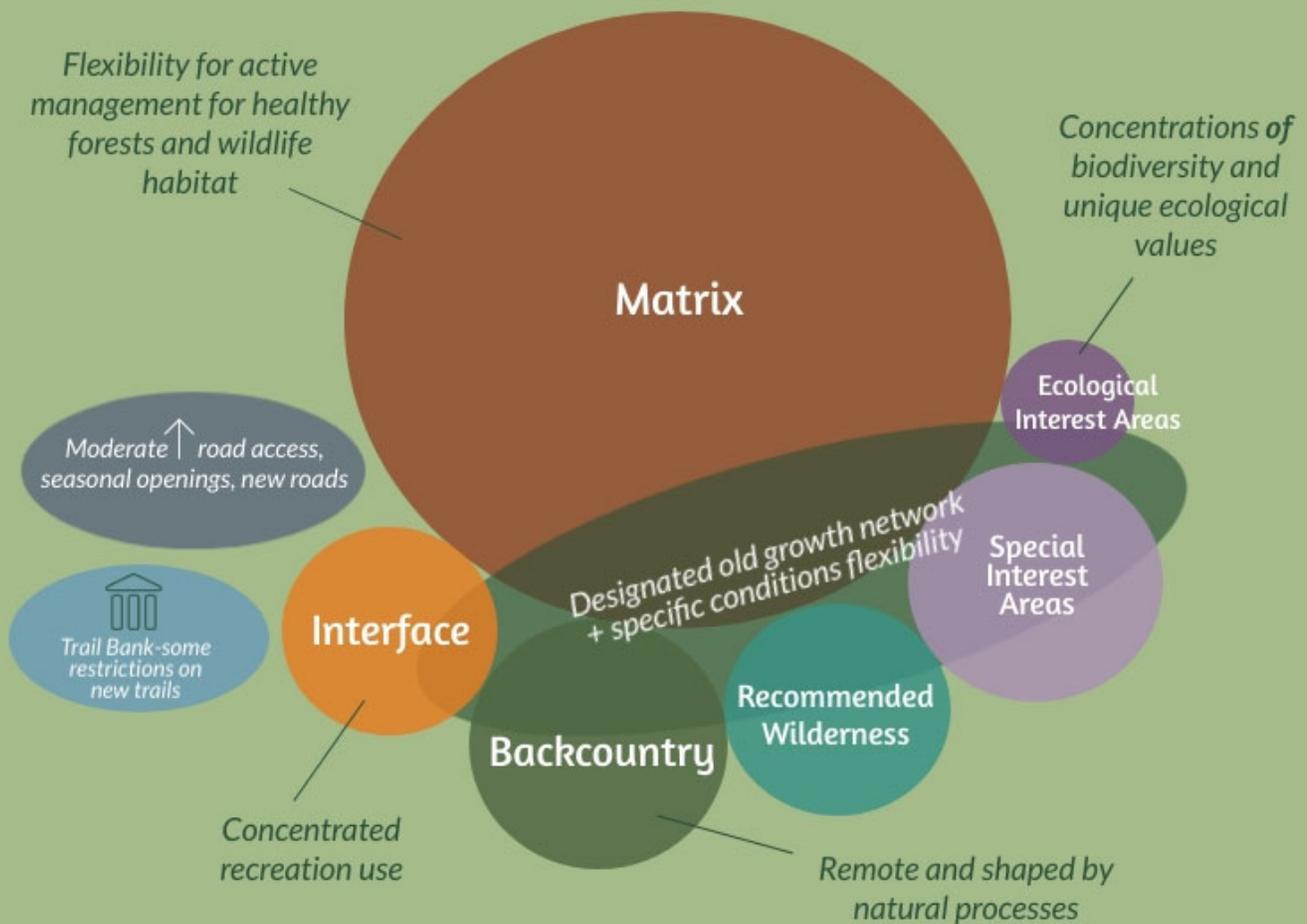
This is a simplification of some of the unique aspects of Alternative C and is not to scale.

# Forest Plan Action Alternatives : Alternative D

Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Proposed Land Management Plan

## Alternative D

Alternative D moderates between Alternatives B and C in terms of plan restrictions versus project flexibility for vegetation management, wildlife habitat, recreation, and access.



This is a simplification of some of the unique aspects of Alternative D and is not to scale.

## Management Areas that differ in size and shape by alternative

The following management areas have the most variation between alternatives:

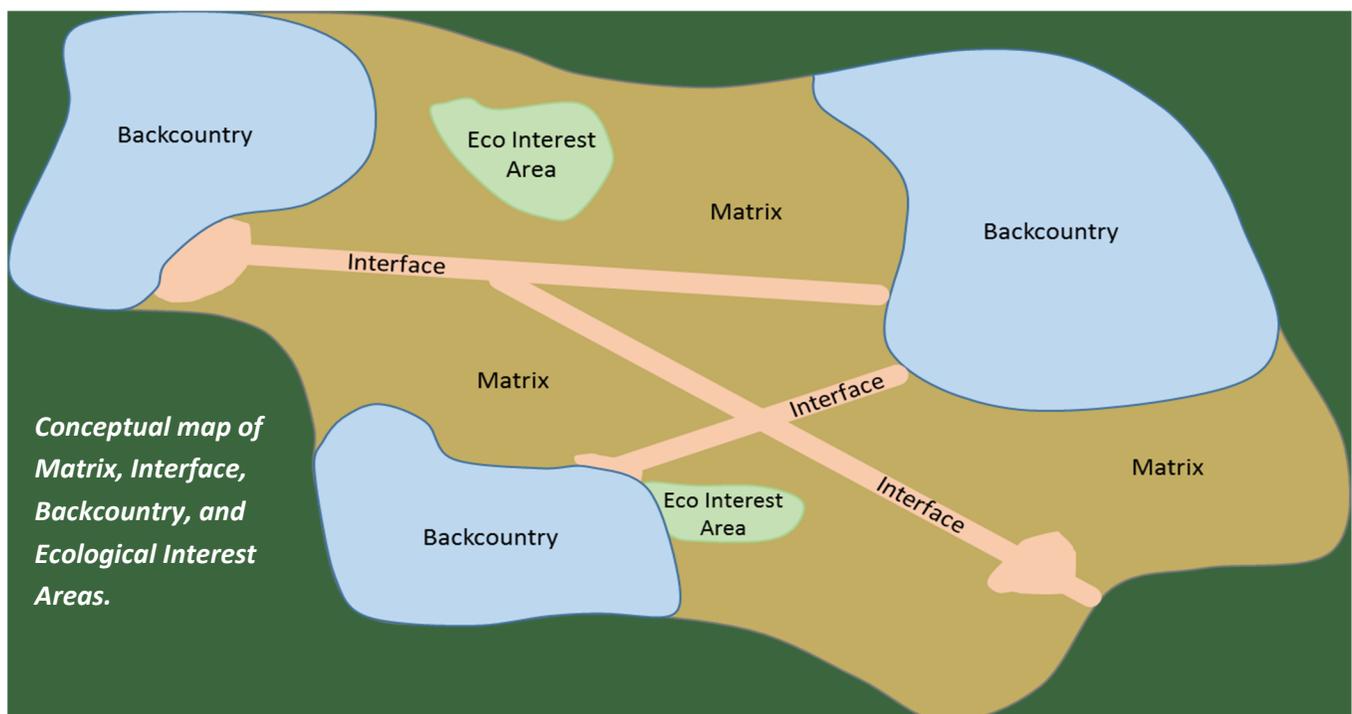
**Matrix** is the largest general forest management area and emphasizes active management to achieve healthy ecosystems and wildlife populations. This Management Area varies by alternative.

**Backcountry** contains large blocks of remote and unroaded forest primarily shaped by natural processes, except where active management is utilized to restore ecosystem composition, structure, function and to provide resiliency against forest health threats. This Management Area varies by alternative and includes most of the Forests' designated Inventoried Roadless Areas.

**Ecological Interest Areas** are places on the forest that support concentrations of the Forests' biodiversity that would benefit from active management focused on restoring and improving the unique values present. This management area varies by alternative.

**Recommended Wilderness** are national forest lands evaluated, found to have some wilderness characteristics, and considered for recommendation to the National Wilderness Preservation System. These areas vary by alternative.

**Interface** contains the most concentrated recreation use on the forest, including developed and dispersed recreation locations, National Recreation Trails and heavily used roads that bring visitors to these locations. This management area has some minor differences among alternatives.



## Management Areas that are the same across alternatives

**Special Interest Areas** are those most exceptional ecological communities that serve as core areas for conservation of the most significant and rare elements of biological diversity on the Forests. These areas are generally resilient and not in need of active restoration, although maintenance activities may be needed to maintain their integrity.

**Research Natural Areas** (Black Mountain and Walker Cove) were designated in 1933 and 1965 respectively, to provide a scientific research baseline for natural forest community conditions where physical and natural processes prevail without human intervention.

**Experimental Forests** (Bent Creek, Coweeta Hydrological Laboratory and Blue Valley) are jointly managed between the USFS Southern Research Station and the National Forests in North Carolina and serve as real-world laboratories for conducting long-term science and management studies.

The **Appalachian National Scenic Trail** is a long distance hiking trail established by Congress in 1968 and managed jointly between the US Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and local affiliated ATC hiking clubs.

**National Scenic Byways** (the Blue Ridge Parkway, Cherohala Skyway and portions of the Forest Heritage Scenic Byway) are administrative designations recognized by the Federal Highway Administration, part of a larger network of scenic routes that exist throughout the country.

**Heritage Corridors** includes congressionally designated National Historic Trails (the Trail of Tears and Overmountain Victory Trail), National Millennium Trails (Unicoi Turnpike), and other historic routes eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Ongoing research is improving the spatial accuracy of the location of these trails.

**Designated Wild and Scenic Rivers** (Chattooga, Horsepasture and Wilson Creek) are those river sections designated by Congress to maintain their free-flowing status and outstandingly remarkable values. The portions that cross Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest lands are covered by this management area.

**Eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers** (see proposed plan for names and segment info) are those evaluated for possible inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System. They will be managed to retain their characteristics until further suitability studies or evaluation is completed. The proposed plan identified newly eligible stretches compared to the current plan (see DEIS Appendix F); these are same across all action alternatives.

**Congressionally Designated Wilderness Areas** (Ellicott Rock, Joyce-Kilmer Slickrock, Linville Gorge, Middle Prong, Shining Rock and Southern Nantahala) were previously designated by Congress to perpetuate or enhance the natural, untrammeled, and undeveloped character of the area while providing opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation or solitude.

**Wilderness Study Areas** (Craggy Mountains, Harper Creek, Lost Cove, Overflow and Snowbird) are designated by Congress to study their potential inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

**Roan Mountain Management Area** is a group of mountains along the North Carolina and Tennessee border with rich temperate diversity, including unique ecological communities, plants and animals.

The **Cradle of Forestry in America** was recognized by Congress as the birthplace of forestry and forestry education in America. The site is managed for educational, interpretive, research and historical purposes.

## Spotlight: Timber Management

### How much timber comes from the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests?

Timber management is a tool for sustaining healthy ecosystems and diversifying forest habitats. Timber also supplies wood to local communities and national and international markets. Historically, forest timber products were a major contribution of national forest lands to local economies, jobs, income and a way of life. Recent years have seen a decreased supply of forest timber products from the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs along with a decrease in the market for and value of those products. Though recent economic contributions have decreased, in the context of regional and state markets, the national forests are important to the local timber industry. Timber jobs continue to be important to smaller communities whose economies have historically been economically dependent on natural resources.

Timber harvest from the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs fluctuated from 2001 –2018 with a general average of 800 to 1,000 acres. There was a peak of acres harvested in 2016 at 1,271 acres, and a low of 318 acres in 2009. The volume produced over the last decade followed similar trends, with four times exceeding 20,000 CCF sold. The lowest volumes occurred in 2009 and 2010 when volumes sold from the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs did not exceed 10,000 CCF.

### What does the proposed plan do?

In the action alternatives, forestwide plan direction reinforces the role that timber management and timber resource outputs have in relation to restoration, wildlife habitat, and healthy forests.

Under all action alternatives, timber harvesting would increase from current averages, although not substantially from a landscape scale perspective. Across the 1.04 million acre forest, the total amount of regeneration and thinning is expected across 1,600 acres annually (Tier 1) or up to 3,800 acres annually (Tier 2). This equates to approximately 1.5% (Tier 1) to 3.8 % (Tier 2) of the total forest being managed by timber harvesting over a decade. These numbers were derived with direct input from a wide variety of collaborators to accomplish broadly supported objectives.

Plan Decision	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D
<i>Annual harvest acres (includes regeneration &amp; thinning)</i>	800 acres	Tier 1: 800-1600 acres Tier 2: 1600 to 3800 acres		

While the same amount of timber activity is expected under all three action alternatives, the location of where that work will occur varies by alternative. On a forest of just over one million acres, the total footprint for potential commercial operations over multiple generations varies between 265,000 and 235,000 acres, depending on the alternative. The majority of timber activity will occur in the Matrix management area where there is the most flexibility to design timber treatments. Timber activity will still occur with lesser frequency and with a focus on restoration in other management areas, including but not limited to Backcountry, Interface, and Ecological Interest Areas. In each of these management areas there are restrictions on the tools or purposes for which timber activity can be used. The placement of management areas varies among alternatives, thus the footprint of potential timber harvest activity varies among alternatives as well.



*To read more, see the proposed direction in the **Proposed Plan, Chapter 2: Terrestrial Ecosystems: Timber Management Practices**, and **Plan Appendix B: Timber Calculations**. The analysis of the effects of different alternatives in the **Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Chapter 3: Timber Resources**.*

## Spotlight: Old Growth Forests

### What is the status of old growth forests on the Nantahala and Pisgah?

Using models to paint the picture of how the land would look with less than current levels of human impact, we have learned that the amount of old growth forest currently in existence on the Nantahala and Pisgah is less than would naturally occur. Longterm, desired conditions are to have 430,000 to 560,000 acres of forest in old growth conditions across all ecozones and elevations. Currently, the forest has an estimated 95,700 acres that meet the minimum ecozone age for acquiring old growth characteristics, however, these sites may not be classified as old growth on the ground.

While there is concern that there is not enough old growth today, there is an understanding that more of the forest is aging compared to the amount being harvested or affected by large scale disturbances. There is a need to diversify the patch size and ecozone representation of old growth forest to provide greater resiliency in the long term. There are differences of opinion about how much of the forest should be managed as old growth, and the best way to provide old growth forest conditions, including whether the forests should be allowed to age naturally or be manipulated to expedite the development of old growth characteristics.

### What does the proposed plan do?

Alternatives vary in the management of old growth. The size and configuration of the designated old growth network varies by alternative, as does a standard that identifies when future modifications can be made to the designated old growth network.

Plan Decision	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D
<i>Acres identified as part of a plan level old growth network</i>	211,118 acres	202,524 acres	255,968 acres	226,015 acres
<i>Adjustments to the old growth network expected at the project level</i>	Project level adjustments may be made	Project level adjustments may be made	Network set at plan level; no project level adjustments	Project level adjustments must meet identified conditions

Under all forest plan alternatives, the forests will continue to age rapidly into the old growth successional classes, with a net annual gain. Under all alternatives, the ecozones across the forest will achieve their desired amount of old growth, but depending on the ecosystem and level of activity, it could take up to 100 years.

Under all alternatives, the designated old growth network would provide a portion of the forests' future old growth. Large amounts of additional forest are trending toward forest desired conditions outside the designated network. Given that so much of the forest is aging, monitoring forest health conditions is increasingly important.



To read more, see the proposed direction in the **Proposed Plan, Chapter 2: Terrestrial Ecosystems: Old Growth Forests** and the analysis of the effects of different alternatives in the **Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Chapter 3: Terrestrial Ecosystems: Forestwide Structure, and Chapter 3: Designated Old Growth Network.**

## Spotlight: Sustainable Recreation

### How sustainable is recreation on the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs?

The Nantahala and Pisgah NFs are some of the most heavily recreated forests in the nation with well over 4 million visits per year. Outdoor recreation is increasing annually at significant rates and demanding increased management consideration around the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs. The Forest Service has tried to keep pace with the growing request by providing recreation opportunities in response to public request. Although the Forest Service has invested millions of dollars in recreation, we do not have the fiscal resources to address all of the aging facilities, older and poorly designed trails, underutilized picnic areas, campsites, or other recreation areas. Separate from fiscal constraints, it is not possible for the Forests to meet the desires of all users in all locations in a way that is sustainable into the future. Instead, the Forest Service must work with the public to choose investments wisely. Done well, a strong sustainable recreation program on the Forests would improve the recreation experience, recreational resources, support local communities, generate economic growth, improve quality of life, forge partnerships and alliances, and promote citizen stewardship. Current forest plan direction is outdated and does not reflect contemporary sustainable recreation concepts or account for changing uses or the increased volume of use being experienced in recent years.

### What does the proposed plan do?

The proposed plan includes more direction to ensure that recreation infrastructure is ecologically, socially and economically sustainable. The proposed plan alternatives place greater emphasis on prioritizing investments at high priority areas, collaborating with stakeholders and local communities to develop a strategic guidance and a shared vision for sustainable recreation for the future. The action alternatives recognize the role of forest recreation to local economies.

The proposed plan identifies 12 distinct Geographic Areas of the forest, each identifying localized goals and opportunities for recreation. The proposed plan alternatives include a new Interface Management Area that provides a focus on concentrated recreation use that includes developed and dispersed recreation sites, National Recreation Trails, trail heads, scenic overlooks, waterfalls, access corridors and recreation hub areas where the public accesses the forest and recreates. Together, the inclusion of Geographic Area goals and the Interface Management Area will highlight recreation opportunities and settings to increase the quality of visitor experiences.

The revised plan alternatives call for maintaining priority sites to standard, developing a strategy for managing climbing opportunities, developing an operations and maintenance guide for dispersed campsites, and identifying sites where non-commercial mineral collection can be conducted with surface penetrating tools. These actions are expected to minimize impacts to ecological and cultural resources, thus improving ecological sustainability.



*To read more, see the proposed direction in the **Proposed Plan, Chapter 2: Dispersed Recreation** and the analysis of the effects of different alternatives in the **Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Chapter 3: Recreation**.*

## Spotlight: New Trail Building

### How sustainable are the trails on the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs?

Nearly 1,500 miles of trails for mountain biking, equestrian, and off-highway vehicle use provide access into both national forests. Among these are eight national recreation trails, a national scenic trail, and a national historic trail. The Forest Service works with partners and volunteers to maintain trails, however, there is a maintenance backlog. Just as the Forest is seeing more visitors today, the trail system is also facing more demands. The Forest Service continually has requests for more trail miles. Users want new experiences and assurance of continued access to favorite places. Sometimes trail users desire to use the same trail for different activities. Some trails were constructed with unsustainable practices decades ago and are in need of frequent maintenance, relocation or decommissioning.

### What does the proposed plan do?

The revised forest plan focuses on moving the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs’ trail system toward environmental, social, and economic sustainability. To address the many unsustainable trails across the landscape, all action alternatives have an objective to decommission or rehabilitate trails that are causing damage or are low use. This is incentivized by the opportunity to offset decommissioned trails with new trails or reroutes that are sustainably designed and constructed. There will be greater consideration within each Geographic Area of availability of trails for different user groups such as bicyclists, equestrians, and hikers. The action alternatives emphasize that a sustainable trail system depends on the help of partners, clarifying that partner organizations and communities are involved in sustainable trail planning and management efforts.

The alternatives differ in their approach to establishing new trail miles for non-motorized trails:

Plan Decision	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D
<i>Approach to adding trail miles to the system</i>	N/A	Least restrictive	Most restrictive	Moderately restrictive

Alternative A, the current plan, is outdated and does not reflect contemporary sustainable recreation concepts, account for changing uses or recent visitation volumes.

Alternative B requires implementation of contemporary trail design principles, minimal resource impacts or user conflicts, and considers ecological, social and economic aspects of sustainability.

Alternative C shares Alternative B’s requirements, and also requires a collaborative planning process to promote partner involvement and improve the social sustainability of proposed trails. This alternative requires that new trail miles be offset by decommissioned miles of comparable length of existing system trail within the Geographic Area. In essence, this Alternative C approach caps the overall trail system mileage at its current levels, although trail relocations for resources protection are permitted.

Alternative D offers greater flexibility than Alternative C to construct new trails, via the establishment of a Trail Bank. The Trail Bank begins with 30 miles of initial credits, that creates credits for decommissioned trail miles, which can be exchanged for new system trail miles.



*To read more, see the proposed direction in the **Proposed Plan, Chapter 2: Dispersed Recreation** and the analysis of the effects of different alternatives in the **Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Chapter 3: Recreation**.*

## Spotlight: Access

Under all alternatives, coordination, collaboration, and partnerships with other federal, state, and county entities in the management of transportation facilities to and through the forests would continue.

In the proposed plan, the Interface management area was designed around places where people use Forests most heavily, including developed and dispersed recreation locations, as well as National Recreation Trails and some heavily used roads that bring visitors to these locations. Access will continue to be prioritized in this management area.

**Trail access:** Hiking is allowed anywhere on the forest that is not closed by a forest order. Motorized trail use occurs on designated trails. The current plan does not restrict cross-country bike and equestrian travel, however the proposed plan would restrict mountain biking and equestrian use to designated trails or roads, except in limited circumstances, such as game retrieval. Limiting mountain biking and equestrian use to designated trails would reduce the proliferation of user-created trails, and the associated resource damage to sensitive plants, animals and cultural sites; erosion; and impacts to aquatic habitats from sedimentation. When the Forest Service spends resources to rehabilitate impacts of user-created trails, there are fewer resources available to maintain system trails. Therefore, while this limitation may negatively affect the riding experience for some users that desire challenge associated with navigating user-created trails, but would have an overall positive effect of improved NF system trail condition and visitor experience for the majority of trail users.

**Road access:** Collectively, the action alternative objectives will improve transportation system conditions and access. Major roads necessary for through traffic would remain open in all alternatives. A road maintenance plan would identify maintenance activities that preserve the transportation system investment with the goal of providing the highest possible level of service with the available funding resources. All proposed plan alternatives call for increasing the mileage of seasonally open roads in the Interface and Matrix Management Areas, prioritizing recreational access, such as hunting and fishing, thereby increasing the motorized access to parts of the forest that would otherwise be accessible only by hiking, biking, or horse. In all proposed plan alternatives, there is no net decrease in miles of open roads in the Interface and Matrix management areas over the life of the plan. However, because alternative C includes the fewest acres of Matrix, and more acres of Backcountry, this alternative results in fewer acres managed to retain open roads.

**Road building:** Under all alternatives, there are some objectives that would require additional road building. In the proposed plan alternatives, road building would occur primarily in the Matrix management area. Under the alternatives, management areas that do not allow for new road construction comprise approximately 11% of the Forest's acreage in Alternative A, 23% for Alternative B, 14% for Alternative C, and 19% for Alternative D. The remainder of the forest has limitations on where permanent new road construction can occur.

**Road decommissioning:** The action alternatives include direction to decommission unneeded system roads and obliterate unauthorized roads in the Backcountry. Additionally, all action alternatives include an objective to decommission a minimum of 50 miles of unauthorized roads and trails within priority watersheds and Inventoried Roadless Areas.



*To read more, see the proposed direction in the **Proposed Plan, Chapter 2: Dispersed Recreation and Chapter 2: Transportation and Access.** the analysis of the effects of different alternatives in the **Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Chapter 3: Recreation and Chapter 3: Transportation and Access.***

## Spotlight: Recommended Wilderness

### How much wilderness is on the Nantahala and Pisgah today?

Wilderness is the portion of the National Forests that is managed for preservation of the natural environment, predominantly free from human influence. Congress designated six wildernesses on the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs totaling approximately 66,400 acres. Under all alternatives, designated wildernesses would remain the same, as only congress can add or remove lands from the National Wilderness Preservation System. In addition to designated wilderness, the current forest plan also includes five congressionally designated Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs); three of which were recommended for wilderness designation in the 1987 Forest Plan (Lost Cove, Harper Creek and Craggy WSAs). All WSAs, both those recommended and not recommended, have been managed (and will continue) to maintain their wilderness characteristics since designation .

### What is the range of acres recommended for wilderness in the proposed plan?

A 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. Public interests range from support for fewer acres in recommended wilderness to support for tens or hundreds of thousands of acres of additional area designations across the Forests.

Building on information from the inventory, and evaluation steps, along with input from public participation, some areas have been identified as recommended wilderness in one or more alternatives in the draft Environmental Impact Statement . The alternatives vary in the number and locations of areas that are recommended for wilderness. **The forest plan can only recommend areas for wilderness, which would be done at the time of issuing a final plan decision. Actual wilderness designation requires an act of Congress.**

Plan Decision	Alternative A	Alternative B	Alternative C	Alternative D
<i>Recommended Wilderness</i>	3 areas (3 WSAs); 15,226 acres	23 areas (5 WSAs); 126,333 acres	2 areas (2 WSAs); 11,193 acres	16 areas (4 WSAs); 74,173 acres

Areas recommended for future wilderness designation would be managed to preserve their condition with minimal evidence of human influence. Human safety is our top priority, so use of motorized equipment would be authorized in for wildfire suppression and search and rescue operations in life threatening situations. Hunting and fishing would continue. Existing trails would continue to be maintained to allow for hiking and equestrian use per current trail-use designations. Collection of non-timber forest products, such as galax, for personal use will continue. Administrative use of motorized equipment for trail maintenance would be allowed and existing roads within recommended areas would either continue to be maintained as linear wildlife fields or decommissioned and allowed to return to a natural state, until designation. No new wildlife fields would be created. In keeping with the 1964 Wilderness Act, there would be no infrastructure development nor timber harvest activities. Restoration activities where the outcomes protect wilderness characteristics would be allowed to continue, including monitoring, relocation of animals, habitat improvements such as removal of nonnative invasive plant species, prescribed fire, and rehabilitation of recreation impacts. Mechanized transport such as bicycles or carts would be prohibited in all recommended areas (with exception of approved mobility devices for the impaired), although there is only one area recommended in one alternative that currently has a trail designated for bike use. Commercial ventures such as collection and sale of non-timber forest products and other commercial activities such as recreation special-use events or commercial filming will not be allowed, preserving the wilderness character of the area.



*For more, see the proposed direction in the **Proposed Plan, Chapter 4: Recommended Wilderness Management Area**, the analysis of the effects of different alternatives in the **Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Chapter 3: Wilderness**, and for details on each area considered and an explanation of how alternatives were formed, see **DEIS Appendix E: Wilderness Evaluation Process**.*

## Spotlight: Social and Economic Resources

### How does the forest plan contribute to the economy of Western North Carolina?

The Pisgah and Nantahala NFs both influence and are influenced by individuals nearby and nationally. Uses, products, services, and visitor opportunities supported by the Forests produce benefits which contribute to the robustness and sustainability of communities, particularly those adjacent to the Forest. The proposed plan includes a new section on Community Connections which recognizes the role of the forest in the local economy and includes an objective to "annually meet with interested WNC local governments or their economic development offices to foster shared actions that support local jobs, attract tourism, and encourage coordination on public health and safety issues."

The total amount of forest-related employment accounts for between 2,644 (Alternative A) and 2,932 jobs (action alternatives, Tier 2). Recreation accounts for the majority of Nantahala and Pisgah NF-related employment under all alternatives, contributing more than 2,000 jobs, with Forest Service expenditures. Payments to State and Counties, and timber also contribute jobs.

As with the employment estimates, recreation and Forest Service expenditures account for the majority of Nantahala and Pisgah NFs contributions to local economic activity. Alternative A contributes \$90.9 million, while the action alternatives would increase that income to \$95.2 million (Tier 1), or \$104.4 million (Tier 2). The sectors with the most Nantahala and Pisgah NFs related labor income are government, accommodation and food services, and retail trade. Many of these sectors are associated with the tourism economy.

Partnering to accomplish these benefits is woven into all aspects of the plan. While there are never enough personnel or funds to accomplish all the work that could be done across the Forest, recent trends in budgets and personnel limit the extent that the Forest Service alone can accomplish. In 1995, the National Forests in North Carolina had about 275 full time employees. In 2019, the number of full time employees had decreased to 185. The revised plan's emphasis on partnering will make it easier to identify opportunities to achieve shared goals.

### How does the proposed plan provide for the values of forest users?

Public values for the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs are as diverse as those who use and love these forests. Under all action alternatives, all aspects of the revised plan provide an increased emphasis on social values.

Ensuring that public voices continue to be integral to forest management in the years ahead, the Forest makes a commitment in the proposed plan to continue to meaningfully involve members of the public in shaping activities on the ground, (except in emergency circumstances). This direction will ensure that projects and program management at the forest level consider public interests through early public involvement.

The Public Involvement and Community Connections sections of the proposed plan are the first forestwide resources discussed in the plan's table of contents. After all, these lands belong to all of us.



*See the proposed direction in the **Proposed Plan, Chapter 2: Public Involvement, Community Connections; Chapter 3: Geographic Areas; the analysis of effects in the Draft EIS Ch. 3: Social and Economic Resources, Appendix G: Coordination with Public Planning Efforts, and Appendix H: Public and Government Involvement.***

## Spotlight: Plants and Animal Species

### How do the Forests contribute to biological diversity?

The Forests play a critical role in sustaining the diversity of plant and animal communities present in Western North Carolina. For example, the Forests contain a greater proportion of high elevation ecosystems than the surrounding landscape, including red oak, northern hardwood, spruce-fir, and Southern Appalachian balds. These forest communities provide habitat for rare or uncommon plants and animals such as Gray's lily, spruce-fir moss spider, and Carolina northern flying squirrel. An assemblage of rare and unusual plant and animals species occur in the 25 unique habitats on the Forest. Additionally, there are hundreds of miles of coldwater streams that support aquatic species of high ecological and public value, such as native brook trout. The tradition of hunting and fishing for food is deeply rooted, too.

### What does the proposed plan do to improve habitat?

The plan includes multiple objectives to improve habitat for species that depend on young forest and open woodlands, which are currently in short supply, and targets at least 50% of activities to be in locations identified for active management by the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. For example, one new objective calls for daylighting closed roads to create young forest conditions. Additional objectives focus on improving aquatic habitat, such as replacing impaired stream crossings.

Compared to the current forest plan, all action alternatives include an enlarged management area for Special Interest Areas, which are exceptional ecological communities on the forest that were identified through coordination with the NC Natural Heritage Program. Alternatives C and D identify an Ecological Interest Areas management area where species composition is a primary driver of management. All action alternatives include an objective to coordinate with the NC Natural Heritage Program to identify natural areas in potential project areas.

### How will the proposed plan impact plant and wildlife habitat?

In this analysis, habitat needs of 1,046 species were analyzed in the EIS, including species of conservation concern identified through coordination with state, federal, tribal academic and nongovernmental organizations; federally-listed threatened and endangered species; and additional plant and animal species that do not have regulatory requirements but were included based on the request of the public or other species experts. Species were placed in groups based on general habitat needs, specific habitat requirements (e.g., snags, den trees, coarse woody debris, hard and soft mast, etc.), limiting factors, or threats. Many species occur in multiple species groups.

Analysis demonstrated that the species evaluated would continue to persist on the National Forests. As a result of this analysis, plan direction will be added into the final Plan for mountain golden heather (*Hudsonia montana*) and Heller's blazing star (*Liatris helleri*) that emphasizes focused prescribed burns and reducing impacts from nonnative invasive species and recreational trampling.

Demand wildlife species commonly hunted, fished, or trapped would see overall improvements in habitat condition across all alternatives, and species populations would persist, with slightly increasing to thriving population levels, depending on the species.



*For more, see the proposed direction in the **Proposed Plan, Chapter 2: Aquatic Ecosystems; Terrestrial Ecosystems; Plant and Animal Diversity; Chapter 3: Ecological Interest Areas & Special Interest Areas**; the analysis of the effects in the **Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Chapter 3: Aquatic Ecosystems; Terrestrial Ecosystems; and DEIS Appendix C: Ecological Sustainability Analysis**.*

## Your input matters

Your input matters! A forest plan that is reflective of diverse interests can only be achieved if we hear from you! The proposed plan and draft Environmental Impact Statement have been built on an unprecedented degree of public and government input for the National Forests in North Carolina. The proposed plan's strong emphasis on public involvement has provided a platform for diverse interests to work together to create a more collaborative plan.

Pre-draft pieces of the Plan have been shared with the public at every stage. Public input has been used to develop plan direction, to develop the management area categories and influence their location on the ground.

Here's a **sample** of what we did with your 2017 input:



Added a second tier of objectives to reflect what we can strive to accomplish with help from partners

Redesigned our concentrated recreation management area, and added clearer plan direction for management of National Recreation Trails

Strengthened plan direction around sustainable recreation, access, old growth, NC Natural Heritage Natural Areas, and wildlife habitat and abundance

Added a fourth plan theme: *Partnering with Others*, and developed specific strategies

Added a new management area in some alternatives focused on enhancing species composition

Added a section on public involvement for guiding future projects

Built alternatives based upon the shared values

Considered data and resources you gave us in the analysis of effects

Now that we're releasing the proposed Plan and DEIS for a 90 day comment period, you have another opportunity to share your thoughts before we finalize the plan and EIS.

*See the next page for how to get involved— these lands belong to all of us!*

*Public involvement is not just part of plan development – it will be an integral part of plan implementation, monitoring and adaptive management.*

*Even after we sign a decision, we are committed continue working with partners and the public as we implement the new plan, together.*

## Next Steps and Providing Input

This Reader's Guide is a summary of several documents available on our website and at our Forest Service offices. We encourage you to visit us if you have more questions: [www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision](http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision).

### **What are the next steps?**

With the release of the proposed forest plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement, the public will have the opportunity to review the documents. This will start a formal 90-day comment period. Public meetings and engagement opportunities will be posted on the website and planned to provide a broad range of opportunities to interact with Forest Service specialists and learn more about the process.

### **How can I provide feedback?**

The preferred method to provide comments is by submitting comments electronically at the comment link available on the [NC Plan Revision](http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision) website ([www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision](http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/nfsnc/nprevision)). This web-based comment page will be available with the publication of the Notice of Availability in the Federal Register and lasts for 90 days. Hard copy comments may also be submitted to National Forests in NC Supervisor's Office, Attn: Forest Plan Revision, 160 Zillicoa Street, Suite A, Asheville NC 28801.

Comments received in response to this notice, including the names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the public record. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered. However, only those individuals and entities who have submitted substantive formal comments related to plan revision during the opportunities provided for public comment will be eligible to file an objection (36 CFR 219.53(a)) when that formal process begins.

Contact Michelle Aldridge, Forest Planner, National Forests in North Carolina, 160 Zillicoa Street, Suite A, Asheville, NC 28801, 828-257-4200 for further information. Individuals who use telecommunication devices for the deaf (TDD) may call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 1-800-877-8339 between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., Eastern Time, Monday through Friday.

### **Tips for writing good comments:**

The Forest Service does not rely on the volume of comments we receive to make a decision. Instead, we rely on the information contained within each comment to help understand the area, the action, and the way the forest resources and its users will be affected.

The strongest comments we receive are:

- ◆ Solution-oriented rather than advocating for or opposing general actions or activities. Comments are not a "vote" on whether the proposed action should take place.
- ◆ Describe specifics, both in terms of what type of management or resources are desired, and also where - identifying portions of the forest or areas of the land, such as bluffs or valleys. Specificity is important, but at the forest plan level, we won't address every road, trail or recreation location - we are developing a strategic plan for use forest-wide, so identifying broader forest regions, or using particular places to make a broader point are both useful.

Please note that all comments, names, and addresses become part of the public record and are subject to Freedom of Information Act requests, except for proprietary information.