

Nantahala and Pisgah Forest Plan Revision
Q&As regarding Special Interest Areas, Wilderness,
and Wild and Scenic Rivers received during the 2020 comment period

Special Interest Areas (SIAs) and State Natural Heritage Natural Areas

Question: I have trouble interpreting the shapefile of SIAs. How come I can't see all the SIAs shown in the EIS acreage table?

A: SIAs are sometimes their own management area; other times they are nested within management areas. For this reason, they have their own map in the map package.

Question: What is the objective to coordinate with the NC Natural Heritage Program mean?

A: The Forest plan includes direction on managing in North Carolina Natural Heritage Natural Areas. The North Carolina Natural Heritage Program (NCNHP) is administered by the state of North Carolina to complete a systematic inventory of elements of natural diversity that exemplify the state's natural heritage. Across the state, the Heritage Program has identified North Carolina Natural Heritage Natural Areas (hereafter "Natural Areas") for their special biodiversity significance due to the presence of either terrestrial or aquatic rare species, unique natural communities, important animal assemblages or other ecological features. Not all Natural Areas possess the same caliber of unique ecological characteristics. These areas are recognized by the Heritage Program on a scale from general to exceptional. Where Natural Areas have been identified on the Nantahala and Pisgah, the Forest Service retains the authority to manage these areas and the Forests will work with the Heritage Program to discuss the values inventoried and locations of unique characteristics versus more typical forest communities. The objective to coordinate annually with the Heritage Program expresses this intent to coordinate on a regular recurring basis to identify Natural Areas in potential project area, discuss unique values that are present and management opportunities to enhance or maintain those values, including, but not limited to, the use of prescribed burning, thinning, regeneration and non-native invasive treatments. The coordination also provides an opportunity to discuss the values present, review the boundaries of Natural Areas and discuss potential updates.

Question: What is the emphasis of management in the Ecological Interest Management Area?

A: Ecological Interest Areas (EIAs) are places on the forest that benefit from a management style that is focused on perpetuating or enhancing individual plant or animal species and communities that are of national, regional, or state significance. Top priorities in this management area would be to restore community composition by treating stands with uncharacteristic vegetation. The need for balancing age classes at the landscape scale would not drive stand level prescriptions. Ecological restoration would result in a mix of forest habitats of various ages, sizes, and configuration.

Question: Special Interest Areas seem to only protect "exceptional" Natural Heritage Natural Areas which is less than 1/3 of these state areas. Why?

A: Special Interest Areas were identified and mapped based on information submitted by the NC Natural Heritage Program. Natural Heritage Natural Areas (NHNAs) that the Heritage Program has identified as

'Exceptional' were considered for special interest area designated in the forest plan. These areas were evaluated and mapped based on criteria established through an interdisciplinary process. Where a special interest area overlapped with a more restrictive management area such as wilderness, or recommended wilderness, the more restrictive management area is displayed on maps. NHNAs that the Natural Heritage Program (NHP) that are not part of the special interest area management area are addressed through plan direction that requires the Forest Service to coordinate with the NHP on proposed and potential management opportunities. Not all NHNAs require the same level of protection and some would actually benefit from restoration activities.

Question: How did you pick issues that would vary by alternative? Is there room for adding issues, such as around the Natural Heritage Natural Areas?

A: Issues were identified early in the plan revision process through input from public comments and discussions with collaborative groups. Issues are identified as points of contention or disagreement regarding the effects of the proposed plan on natural resources and were shared with the public early in plan development. Special designations was identified as an issue early on and addresses the inclusion of NHNAs as special interest areas. While special interest areas do not vary by alternative, the inclusion of NHNAs within recommended wilderness, backcountry, and EIAs does vary by alternative.

Wilderness

Question: I have trouble interpreting the shapefile of recommended wilderness. As an example, under Alternative D I see 16 areas (4 WSAs); 74,173 acres. But when I check the shapefile data and maps, I only find 1 WSA in Alternative D which is SW of Highlands in Nantahala.

A: In the shapefile for MAs, recommended wilderness areas are denoted as 6R in the attribute table. There is only 1 Congressionally designated WSA in Alt D that is NOT recommended for wilderness, all other WSAs are recommended for wilderness and therefore are identified as 6R in the shapefile.

Question: How do wilderness areas relate to designated old growth areas?

A: A significant number of the designated large patches of old growth are within designated wilderness but not all areas that were recommended for wilderness are included in the designated old growth network.

Question: What happens to proposed wilderness if not enacted by Congress by the end of the planning period?

A: Areas that are recommended for wilderness in the revised forest plan will be managed to maintain wilderness characteristics until Congress enacts legislation for their designation. Any future forest plan revision process will reevaluate all Forest Service lands not already designated as wilderness, consistent with the planning directives, and make recommendations for wilderness.

Question: Will local counties be asked for approval of proposed Wilderness additions?

A: No, the counties will not be asked for approval; however, county input is considered just like other forms of input, during the decision of which areas to recommend for wilderness. Input from elected officials often reflects the input of constituents so that is considered when considering whether there is

public support for recommending an area as wilderness. The FS only makes a recommendation for wilderness and wilderness designation must be approved by Congress through legislation outside of the forest plan revision process.

Question: Given that all action alternatives require new trail proposals to be collaborative & sustainable, why additionally exclude new horse trails in Wilderness? See pg. 264, Wilderness standard number 5, “Do not expand existing network of equestrian trails.”

A: Equestrian use is not prohibited in Wilderness and there are horse trails in existing designated wilderness. The standard to not expand equestrian trails in wilderness comes from concerns of increased impacts of equestrian use and that maintenance of equestrian trails often requires machines, which are not allowed in Wilderness. On the Nantahala and Pisgah NFs, there are deep organic soils and high annual rainfall, which requires more frequent tread maintenance. Failing to perform tread maintenance on equestrian trails at needed frequencies could impact wilderness values. Changing or eliminating the proposed standard will be considered.

Question: What’s the background, thinking, and data/monitoring that informed the direction on “permanent anchors” (for climbing) in Wilderness?

A: The proposed plan language regarding permanent anchors was informed by Regional and Washington Office wilderness program managers, Plan revision steering team members, and other Forest-level program managers with climbing opportunities in wilderness. The proposed direction is intentionally simple and flexible; placing decisions on fixed anchors in designated wilderness with the local line officer. Requiring District Ranger approval for installing or replacing fixed anchors in designated wilderness would prevent uncontrolled expansion of climbing routes or placement of new fixed anchors which may impact sensitive species, cultural sites, or affect the naturalness and undeveloped values of wilderness character. Consultation with the line officer for approval of fixed anchor placement, replacement, or maintenance should be planned in advance. This is the most flexible way to collaborate with the climbing community while protecting wilderness and ecological resources. Like many dispersed recreation activities on National Forest System lands, there are inherent risks associated with rock climbing and responsibility for risk assessments and safety precautions reside with the users.

Question: How were fixed anchors considered for non-Wilderness management areas?

A: The plan is inherently permissive - if there are no prohibitions on an activity (closure orders), then it is allowed. The climbing strategy could address the issue further or add management approaches, such as using camouflaged anchors. In the draft plan, there are no prohibitions on anchors in non-wilderness areas.

Question: We’re thinking through habitat restoration limitations for proposed wilderness. We are particularly concerned about some of the proposed wilderness additions that feature some spruce-fir communities that we have prioritized for restoration. Can work be done via helicopter in designated or proposed wilderness?

A: In designated wilderness, non-emergency landing of a helicopter would require Regional Forester approval. Air and long-line drops of people, equipment, or materials are considered a landing, regardless of whether the aircraft physically touches down within wilderness boundaries. For consideration of approval, proposed actions must preserve or enhance wilderness characteristics, and a minimum requirements analysis must show the prohibited use is the best tool to achieve this. Wilderness characteristics include undeveloped, naturalness, untrammled, opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, or other resources of value. Another consideration is that in some cases a

proposed action involving habitat manipulation may be considered trammeling; which requires approval by the Chief of the Forest Service. Only in very unusual circumstances would the agency seek approval for either of these prohibited uses in designated wilderness. Recommended wilderness in the proposed Plan has a standard which allows for administrative use of motorized equipment or mechanized transport until the area is designated as wilderness by congress. Of the recommended areas in the proposed Plan, only a few have spruce-fir habitat. The most significant of these is the Black Mountains area. Acreage of spruce-fir ecozones for all areas evaluated for potential addition to the National Wilderness Preservation System are identified in DEIS Appendix E. Where spruce-fir habitat is a significant portion of a recommended area, it is noted in the Appendix E analysis.

Wild and Scenic Rivers

Question: Why doesn't the plan update boating direction the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River?

A: The Forest Service has not considered changes in plan direction for the Chattooga River, as that was identified early on in the plan revision process by the Forest Supervisor as outside the scope of this revision effort. In 2014, then Forest Supervisor Kristin Bail decided the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Plan revision would not revisit the issue of upper Chattooga River boating, because the required use monitoring had not begun. Her decision was supported by the Regional Forester. Initial analysis of the recently completed first round of monitoring may be insufficient to determine trends, impacts, and potentially needed changes to allowed use. As the lead river management unit, the Sumter National Forest will assess current and future monitoring results and make adaptive management decisions in coordination with the National Forests in North Carolina. If managed use changes, the Forest Plan will be amended accordingly.