



File Code: 1950-1/2350-5

Date: February 27, 2009

Dear Interested Party:

The USDA Forest Service is seeking comments on two proposals regarding management of the Upper Tellico Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) System:

1. An Environmental Assessment (EA) for the long-term management of the Upper Tellico OHV System. You may download a copy of the EA and related graphics at <http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc/tellico>. If you would like to receive a paper copy of the EA, please e-mail your request to: comments-southern-north-carolina@fs.fed.us or call (828) 257-4817, and one will be mailed to you. For questions concerning the project or the EA contact Candace Wyman, Project Coordinator, at 828-257-4816.
2. A temporary closure of the Upper Tellico OHV System for resource protection, effective April 1, 2009. This closure would prohibit possession or use of a motorized vehicle on a road or trail within the Upper Tellico OHV System, with the exception of highway-legal vehicles on 420-1 and certain other exceptions described in the closure order until a final project decision is implemented.

The Upper Tellico OHV System is located on Tusquitee Ranger District, Nantahala National Forest, Cherokee County, NC. In June 2008, we publicized a proposal for long-term management of the System, designed to greatly reduce the amount of soil leaving the System and entering the Tellico River and its tributaries, while still providing an OHV trail system. This proposal is referred to as the "proposed action" or Alternative B and is described in detail in Chapter 1 of the EA. We received around 1,500 public comments on the proposed action. Alternatives to the proposed action were developed in response to the comments and environmental issues identified by the Agency. A wide range of comments was received, so six alternatives are analyzed in the EA, identified as Alternatives A through F. We would now like your review and comment on the alternatives and analysis before making a final decision on long-term management of the System.

The following is a brief description of the alternatives analyzed in detail in the EA. Please refer to the EA, Chapters 2 and 3, for more information about each alternative.

- Alternative A is the "no action" alternative that reflects the existing trail system with 2007 management and funding levels.
- Alternative B is the "proposed action" that was released in June 2008 for public comment. It was developed to address the problems initially identified in trail condition surveys conducted in 2007-2008.
- Alternative C closes the OHV System, but maintains over 10 miles of existing Forest system roads in the area, open year-round or seasonally, to provide for public highway-legal vehicle access for hunting, fishing and other recreation uses. It was developed in



response to public concerns that the proposed action (Alternative B) did not go far enough in eliminating trails on sensitive soils and trails near water.

- Alternative D was developed in response to public concerns that the OHV Trail System should meet current trail density and challenge level standards, and not require a Forest Plan amendment.
- Alternative E was developed in response to public concerns that the proposed action (Alternative B) would eliminate too many high challenge OHV experiences.
- Alternative F was developed in response to public concerns that the proposed action (Alternative B) would eliminate too many OHV trail miles.

The environmental concerns that initiated the proposed management changes are described in the EA, as are the projected direct, indirect, and cumulative environmental effects of each of these Alternatives.

The EA shows that the Upper Tellico OHV System has extensive damage and contributes unacceptable levels of sediment into the Tellico River and its tributaries. Sediment is leaving the OHV System from more than 2,000 locations along the trails. The Agency is in violation of North Carolina state water quality standards because of the conditions on Upper Tellico OHV System. Since the Upper Tellico River watershed is located in an area of steep terrain, highly erosive soils, and high rainfall, maintaining an OHV trail system without causing significant environmental damage is extremely difficult.

While I understand how important the Upper Tellico OHV System is to OHV users, the impacts to water quality are so significant that I cannot recommend keeping the System open at this time. After careful consideration of the environmental effects of the alternatives as presented in the EA, my preferred alternative is Alternative C, which closes the OHV System. Alternative C would maintain over 10 miles of existing Forest system roads (currently also OHV trails), open year-round or seasonally, to provide public access for hunting, fishing and other recreation uses. Trail 1 (FS Road 420-1) would be paved and kept open as a through route for highway-legal vehicles.

I want to emphasize that a final decision has not yet been made. This public review period is an opportunity for you to give us constructive feedback. I encourage you to review the environmental assessment and provide us with any information that you think we have not considered adequately. Your comments need to be as specific as possible and you must provide the following information: 1) Your name and address; 2) Title of the project; 3) Specific substantive comments on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons that I should consider in reaching a decision; and 4) Your signature or other means of identification verification. For organizations, a signature or other means of identification verification must be provided for the individual authorized to represent your organization.

Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after publication of this notice in *The Asheville Citizen-Times*. Comments may be mailed electronically, in a common digital format, to: comments-southern-north-carolina-nantahala-tusquitee@fs.fed.us; or by regular mail to: National Forests in North Carolina, Attn: Candace Wyman, 160 A Zillicoa

Street, Asheville, NC 28801, or faxed to 828-257-4263. Hand delivered comments must be received within our normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Thank you for your continued interest in management of the National Forests in North Carolina and the Tusquitee Ranger District.

Sincerely,

/S/ MARISUE HILLIARD

MARISUE HILLIARD
Forest Supervisor