

Categorical Exclusion

Issuance of a Special Use Permit For Fannin County Adventure Race

USDA Forest Service
Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests
Conasauga Ranger District
Fannin and Murray County, Georgia

DECISION – I have decided to issue a special use permit to the Fannin County Chamber of Commerce for an adventure race event.

PURPOSE AND NEED – The purpose of this permit will be to allow the permittee to conduct a 94-mile adventure race on existing Forest Service system roads and trails and to use an existing campground as a checkpoint and aid station on Chattahoochee National Forest system land. The permit will be for a recreation event special use on the Conasauga Ranger District.

The event will begin on private land off Georgia Highway 5 and end in Blue Ridge, Georgia. The second leg of the race will use facilities administered by the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee. The permit will allow use of the Pinhoti Trail (from Buddy Cove Gap to the South Fork Trail), South Fork Trail, and the Benton MacKaye Trail (from Flat Top Mountain to Holloway Gap and from Bushy Head Gap to McKenny Gap), and the following system roads: FS 22, FS 22A & B, FS 124, FS 126, FS 64, FS 64 A, D & E, FS 792, FS 793, and FS 797. The Jacks River Fields Campground will be used as an aid station and checkpoint. No new ground disturbance will be required for this action.

The two-day event will take place on November 7 and 8, 2008 and is expected to last about 30 hours. Approximately 90 teams of three are expected to participate transitioning between mountain biking and trail running. Use of each trail will conform to the managed use, e.g. no mountain bikes permitted on hiker only trails. There will be temporary checkpoints and aid stations along the route. The roads normally open to public travel will remain open during the race. The Jacks River Fields Campground will be open to the public as usual. Fannin County has successfully conducted other adventure races on National Forest lands administered by the Blue Ridge Ranger District.

The Action meets Goal 31 of the Forest Plan, “Provide a spectrum of high quality, nature-based recreation settings and opportunities that reflect the unique or exceptional resources of the Forest and the interests of the recreating public on an environmentally sustainable, financially sound, and operationally effective basis” (page 2-31).

The permitted area is located on lands allocated by the Forest Plan to either Management Prescription 7.B, Scenic Corridors and Sensitive Viewsheds, 7.E.2, Dispersed Recreation Areas with Vegetation Management, 9.H, Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Plant Associations, 11, Riparian Corridors along all perennial and intermittent streams, or 12.A, Remote Backcountry Recreation. The action meets the objectives and standards for the Management Prescriptions.

REASONS FOR CATEGORICALLY EXCLUDING THE DECISION – I have determined that this action falls into a category of actions that may be excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment. Specifically, the project falls within the following categorical exclusion category that does not require a project file or a decision memo at 36 CFR 220.6 (d) #8: “Approval, modification, or continuation of minor, short term special uses of National Forest System lands.”

Based on the results of internal and external scoping, I have determined that no extraordinary circumstances exist that could cause the action involved to have significant effects.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT - Scoping letters were mailed on July 29, 2008 to all individuals, groups, and agencies listed on the district scoping list. In addition, letters were mailed to officers of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association. Five comments were received, three generally in favor of the proposed action and two against it.

The issues and concerns identified by the respondents and the Forest Service response are as follows:

- 1) At issue was a general objection to adventure races on National Forest System lands.
 - Forest Service policy recognizes recreation events, such as adventure races, as legitimate, conforming uses of National Forest System lands.
- 2) At issue was the November 7-8 timing of the race which coincides with hunting season and its potential negative effect on hunters.
 - The deer and bear firearms hunt is the only hunting season that currently attracts a sizeable number of hunters to this area. While a small part of the race event is located in the Cohutta Wildlife Management Area which is closed to deer and bear hunting at the time of the race, most of the race event falls within the Georgia state northern hunting zone where general hunting regulations apply. The firearms deer hunt runs from October 18th to January 1st and the firearms bear hunt goes from October 18th to December 7th. Since the race only lasts for no more than 30 hours, any effect on hunters will be short term. Additionally, the event participants will generally be confined to roads and trails. Since hunters cannot legally hunt from or shoot across public roads, the effect of the race on hunters is not expected to be significant.
- 3) At issue was the loss of access by the general public.
 - The roads, trails and campground that will be used for the event will remain open to general public use.
- 4) Three comments expressed concern with the potential impacts of the race on the listed trails and their associated stream crossings.
 - The terms and conditions of the special use permit specify that “the (permit) holder shall maintain the improvements and permit area to standards of repair, orderliness, neatness, sanitation, and safety acceptable to the authorized officer...” The permittee will be required to repair any damage that he causes to a trail, stream crossing or other Forest Service improvement.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS - This action is consistent with the 2004 Forest Plan for Management Prescriptions 7.B, 7.E.2, 9.H. 11, and 12.A. This project adheres to the applicable standards and monitoring requirements in the Forest Plan, and NFMA.

No Proposed, Endangered, Threatened or Sensitive (PETS) plants or animals were present in the project area during inventory. The biological evaluation determined that there would not be any adverse effects on species of special concern.

This action complies with the National Historic Preservation Act.

This project will be implemented with appropriate erosion control measures for developed recreation trails, planned and designed to comply with Georgia's Erosion and Sediment Control Act and current Forest Plan standards. This project complies with applicable sections of the Clean Water Act.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES - This decision is not subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12(f).

IMPLEMENTATION DATE - This project may be implemented immediately.

CONTACT PERSON - For further information concerning this decision, contact Larry Thomas by phone, letter, e-mail or in person. The address of the Conasauga Ranger District is 3941 Highway 76, Chatsworth, GA 30705 and the phone number is 706-695-6736. Office hours are from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm, Monday through Friday. Contact Larry by e-mail at lrthomas@fs.fed.us.

SIGNATURE AND DATE OF RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

/s/ Michele H. Jones
MICHELE H. JONES
DISTRICT RANGER

September 15, 2008
Date