



File Code: 1950, 2320

Date: December 10, 2002

Dear Forest Stakeholder:

The 36,977-acre Cohutta Wilderness is a special place where one can still escape “civilization” and find calm and solitude in a forested setting. It is an area that retains its natural character, yet, at the same time, provides outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation, from fishing and hunting to backpacking, hiking and horseback riding. Unfortunately, the Cohutta wilderness is being “loved to death”. With annual use estimated at 60,000-70,000 people and climbing, it is one of the most heavily used wilderness areas in the nation. The very qualities that made this area worthy of wilderness designation are now being threatened by over-use and environmental impacts from visitors either unaware or unconcerned of wilderness values.

In order to both preserve the wilderness character and provide for the enjoyment of an unimpaired wilderness for present and future generations of Americans, new management strategies for the Cohutta Wilderness are being considered. This letter serves to inform you of these proposed actions that were developed using the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) planning process. Your comments are invited.

The LAC planning process began in October 2000 when the public was informed of the Forest Service’s intention to consider changes in management of the Cohutta Wilderness. Nearly 400 scoping letters were sent to all parties with a known interest in the Cohutta Wilderness, articles were sent to eight area newspapers, and three public meetings were held to discuss the loss of wilderness qualities and management actions needed to reverse this trend. Through this exchange, public issues and concerns were identified and a citizen-based Task Force was assembled to work through the LAC process and develop recommendations for wilderness managers. Open to any and all citizens, the Task Force consisted of a diverse group of interested persons from hunters and anglers to equestrians and backpackers, from blue-collar workers to professionals, and from local to metro area citizens in both Georgia and Tennessee. The Task Force members differed widely in their opinions and ideas for wilderness management, but they shared a common goal...to preserve the Cohutta wilderness and protect it from human-caused resource damage. The proposed actions described below which may guide future management of the Cohutta Wilderness were developed from the recommendations of that Task Force.

The following actions are proposed:

1. The Cohutta Wilderness would be managed as three distinct Opportunity Classes (OC), I, II and III. These “opportunities” would provide a range of experiences from the most primitive, Opportunity Class I, to the least primitive, Opportunity Class III. The Opportunity Classes are further defined as follows:



Opportunity Class I. This Opportunity Class would exist throughout the wilderness, out of sight or sound (300 feet) from any trail, trailhead, perimeter road, the Jacks or Conasauga rivers, management designated campsites, and major natural attractions such as the Jacks River Falls. This Opportunity Class is essentially the main body of the wilderness, outside of the two named river corridors, where no designated trails are found, but where more opportunity for solitude and a true wilderness experience exists. Little to no sign of human influence will be found here.

Opportunity Class II. This Opportunity Class would exist as a corridor along maintained trails that receive light to moderate use. The corridor is measured as 300 feet on either side of the following trails: Benton MacKaye, Chestnut Lead, Chestnut Mountain, East Cowpen, Hemp Top, Hickory Ridge, Panther Creek, Penitentiary Branch, Rice Camp, Rough Ridge, Sugar Cove, Tearbitches, and Hickory Creek trail north of the Conasauga River. Visitor contacts occur randomly and vary seasonally. Opportunities for solitude exist but less so when approaching higher density visitor areas within Opportunity Class III. Signs of human use will be found along the trail system and at occasional campsites.

Opportunity Class III. This Opportunity Class would include lands within sight or sound (300 feet) of any trailhead or perimeter road, the Jacks and Conasauga rivers, major natural attractions and high use designated trails including the Jacks River, Conasauga River, and Hickory Creek trail south of the Conasauga river. Visitor encounters on trails and at camp are common with limited opportunity for solitude during peak visitation seasons. Human influence is most evident here with some persistent site impacts present.

Embedded within Opportunity Class III is a smaller opportunity area identified as the Jacks River Falls Area (JRFA). This area would include lands within 300 feet of the Jacks River Falls and its immediate environment, Beech Creek and the Beech Bottom trail. From the Jacks River trail river crossing about 0.5 miles upriver of the Falls, to the next trail river crossing about one mile below the Falls is included with the JRFA. It is the most heavily visited and degraded area in the Cohutta Wilderness. Little opportunity for solitude and a wilderness experience is available. Human-caused resource damage is extensive. Primary emphasis in this area will be preservation of the natural environment in the midst of high visitor pressure on a major scenic attraction, Jacks River Falls.

2. Within the three opportunity classes, the following limits on use would be applied to reduce human impacts on the wilderness resource and restore the wilderness environment:

LIMITS ON USE	OPPORTUNITY CLASS I	OPPORTUNITY CLASS II	OPPORTUNITY CLASS III
Size of Hiking Groups	4	12	12
Size of Equestrian Groups (a)	3	8	8
Organized Groups per Day (b)	2	4	4
Campsite Distance from	25 ft	50 ft	50 ft

Streams (c)			
Campsite Distance from Trails	N/A	20 ft	20 ft
Tents per Campsite	2	4	4
Horses per Campsite	3	8	8
Campers per Campsite	4	8	12
Designated Campsites (c) (none specifically for equestrians)	0	Yes, in some areas	Yes
Campsite Size Limits	0	400 sq. ft.	800 sq. ft.
Adjacent Campsites Visible	0	2	4
Distance Between Campsites	1320 ft	300 - 2640 ft	75 - 300 ft
Campsites per Mile of Trail	N/A	0 - 13	13 - 26+
Fire Rings per Campsite	0 (d)	1	1
Fire Ring Maximum Diameter	0 (d)	18 in	18 in

- (a) The number in equestrian groups is the maximum number of horses and riders taken separately. For example in OC II, a group size of 8 means 8 horses and 8 riders.
 - (b) Examples include non-commercial church, scout, school, therapeutic groups. Groups must have a free group permit.
 - (c) Campsites must be placed at least 50 ft. from streams and rivers in OC II and III, and 25 ft. in OC I. Camping will be confined to campsites designated by the Forest Service in OC III. In OC II and III, the Forest Service may establish designated campsites less than 50 ft. from streams and rivers when terrain and resource conditions are favorable.
 - (d) Fire rings are not allowed in OC I. Fuel stoves and campfires using the mound fire or pit fire method are permitted.
3. Within the Jacks River Falls Area, the following area-specific prohibitions would be established (in addition to those use limits listed above for OC III) to reverse overuse, to reduce activities contributing to significant resource impacts, and to restore the wilderness environment:
 - a. No overnight camping permitted. An exception in the Beech Bottom area would allow for the creation of 10-12 designated “cold-weather” campsites for use from November 1 through March 31.
 - b. Day Use Area Only.
 - c. No campfires permitted. An exception in the Beech Bottom area would allow for mound fires or pit fires (no fire rings) to be constructed at the 10-12 designated campsites during the cold weather season of use. Evidence of fires must be removed before leaving camp.
 - d. No alcoholic beverages permitted.
 4. A free, non-restrictive, mandatory permit system would be implemented for the purpose of

more accurate visitor counts, wilderness education, and public information regarding the new regulations and limits for the Cohutta Wilderness.

To help me make a well-informed decision, I would like to hear from you regarding these proposed actions. We are currently in the process of determining the significant environmental issues and public concerns as they relate to this proposal. You can help us in completing our analysis by reviewing the proposed actions, and informing us of any issues or concerns you may have. For your comments to be most helpful, please be as specific as possible.

To have your comments considered in our decision process, we need to receive them by **January 21, 2003**. You may comment in person at the Armuchee-Cohutta District office, by mail at the address listed above, or by email to lrthomas@fs.fed.us.

Thank you for your interest in the Cohutta Wilderness and the management of your National Forests.

Sincerely,

/s/ Debra L. Whitman

DEBRA L. WHITMAN
District Ranger