

SOUTHERN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CENTER

Telephone 828-258-2023

22 SOUTH PACK SQUARE, SUITE 700
ASHEVILLE, NC 28801-3494

Facsimile 828-258-2024

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Kristin Bail, Forest Supervisor
National Forests in North Carolina
Nantahala-Pisgah Plan Revision
160 Zillicoa St., Suite A
Asheville, NC 28801
NCplanrevision@fs.fed.us

Re: Comments for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Land Resources Management Plan Revision –Potential Additions to Wilderness Inventory and Special Designations

Dear Supervisor Bail:

Please accept the following comments on behalf of the Western North Carolina Alliance, The Wilderness Society, Wild South, and the Southern Environmental Law Center. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the process that resulted in a draft “Inventory of Potential Additions to Wilderness” and related maps that were the subject of a public meeting on April 17, 2014, for the plan revision of the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests (“NPNF”). Below we offer feedback on the process itself, how that process impacted the resulting draft inventory, and the relationship of the inventory to the forthcoming evaluation of these areas for wilderness or other potential designations. Generally, we are supportive of the draft inventory list generated by the forest. However, because additional areas meet the threshold requirements for the inventory, the inventory list should be expanded for further evaluation. An expanded list is necessary for an effective and sufficiently inclusive evaluation of areas for wilderness, as well as other potential designations. Our comments include specific examples of areas that should have been included in the inventory.

We are also providing our feedback on the “potential criteria for designation of special areas” discussed at the public meeting. Designations are crucial to preserving and protecting unique characteristics and features of special areas, from rare communities to scenic and recreational experiences. Recognizing and managing to protect the special values foundational to these areas in the revised plan will not only fulfill the new rule’s requirement to achieve ecosystem integrity, protect biodiversity, and support local economies, but will also allow more efficient and certain project implementation under new plan direction. This latter point is worth repeating: we do not believe that robust protections for designated areas will limit an effective timber program, which is already constrained by fiscal realities on the forest. Instead we see opportunity to focus the agency’s budget on roaded areas of the forest which have been degraded

by past land uses—areas where stakeholders see restoration need and fewer competing resource concerns.

We look forward to a continuing dialogue as the forest refines the criteria it will use for assigning special designations and develops complimentary management direction.

I. NPNF Inventory of Potential Additions to Wilderness

A. Process for Developing the Inventory List

The NPNF staff followed a seven-step process to develop the draft inventory list, according to a draft distributed at the public meeting entitled, “Process Version 1: Inventory of Potential Additions to Wilderness-Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Plan Revision – Spring 2-14.” While that process included important elements for development of a draft inventory (e.g., consideration of Inventoried Roadless Areas, adjacency to existing wilderness), it also interjected additional and different criteria that resulted in an overly narrow inventory. These additional criteria, discussed below, are not found in the draft directives or FACA recommendations and inappropriately limited the inventory list *before* evaluation could occur.

The Forest Service must not conflate the inventory and evaluation processes. During the inventory process, the Forest Service may consider only the objective criteria of size, roads improvements and other improvements. *See* Draft Directives, Forest Service Handbook (“FSH”) 1909.12, Ch. 71.2 (criteria), Secs. 71.1 (instructing the agency to “create an inventory of all lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the NWPS *using the criteria and steps outlined in section 71.2.*”) (emphasis added).¹ Inventory and evaluation have different purposes and, accordingly, different criteria.

The purpose of the inventory is to effectively identify “*all lands that may be suitable for inclusion in the NWPS [National Wilderness Preservation System].*” Secs. 71.1 (emphases added). The inventory process is intended to be not only broad, but also objective. *See* Sec. 70.6 & FACA Rec (inventory should be “transparent and consistent across forests”). The directives therefore recognize that the controversies surrounding previous roadless inventories were caused by the subjective use of narrow criteria, which resulted in inconsistent inventories. To underscore the breadth of the inventory, the directives recognize that the statutory definition of wilderness includes “previously modified” areas that can be “passive[ly] or active[ly] restor[ed].” Sec. 71.22b, FACA Rec. The directives further explain that the inventory must be consistent with the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act (“EWAA”). Secs 70.6, 71.22b, FACA Rec.; EWAA, P.L. 93-622 (1975) (noting that “it is in the national interest that these *and similar areas* in the eastern half of the United States be promptly designated as wilderness ...”).

¹ These comments cite to the Draft Directives, Forest Service Handbook 1909.12 (Feb. 2013 Draft), and incorporate FACA recommendations, “Markup of Directives with Committee Recommendations (Final Nov. 15, 2013),” where FACA recommended revisions. For consistency the Draft Directives are referred to as “Sec. __.”

Below are ways that the process followed by the NPNF in creating an inventory list diverged from the directives and how that inappropriately reduced the resulting inventory. Parts of the NPNF process that depart from the directives and would have excluded *existing* wilderness are particularly problematic. If the agency is applying criteria which would exclude wilderness areas that currently exist on the NPNF, its interpretation is unreasonable. In addition, any error uncorrected at this stage will be carried through to evaluation and also impact the agency's obligations under the National Environmental Policy Act ("NEPA"). Finally, we make specific recommendations about how a revised process should result in an expansion of the inventory list. *See infra* pp. 9-14. We ask that the NPNF amend its inventory and maps, and urge a continuing discussion as it moves forward into evaluation.

1. Size Criterion: Areas less than 5,000 acres: The process followed by the NPNF automatically "eliminated from the inventory" areas less than 5,000 acres that are not adjacent to wilderness. *See* NPNF Process, steps 3 and 6. The EWAA is clear, however, that 5,000 acres is not an automatic requirement for wilderness. It says, and the FACA recommendations embrace, that an area less than 5,000 acres can be suitable wilderness, if it is "of sufficient size to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition." 16 U.S.C. § 1131(c); Sec. 71.21, FACA Rec. (quoting the same). There is no description of what criterion was used to determine that no areas less than 5,000 acres could be effectively managed as a separate unit. And indeed, other blocks of wilderness less than 5,000 acres are being managed in other Appalachian forests, for example:

Unaka Mtn (Cherokee NF) = 4,496 acres
Little Frog (Cherokee NF) = 4,666 acres
Gee Creek (Cherokee NF) = 2,483 acres
Bald River Gorge (Cherokee NF) = 3,721 acres
Thunder Ridge (Jefferson NF) = 2,344 acres
Little Dry Run (Jefferson NF) = 2,858 acres
Peters Mtn (Jefferson NF) = 3,328 acres
Shawvers Run (Jefferson NF) = 3,366 acres
Little Wilson Creek (Jefferson NF) = 3,613 acres

Below we identify specific areas less than 5,000 acres that should not have been excluded from the NPNF inventory based on this metric. The directives expressly require (as does the statute) that such an area would be carried through to evaluation to determine whether it is of "sufficient size to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired conditions." Sec. 72.1 (3).

2. Road Improvements: The NPNF's process, as described in the meeting, excluded areas due to the mere presence of any roads assigned ML 2. This was true regardless of the actual road conditions and rested on unverified assumptions about maintenance conditions. This significant departure from the directives resulted in the erroneous exclusion of many areas from the inventory. In eastern national forests, the presumption is that areas with ML 2 roads that are identified as closed yearlong may be *included* in inventory.² Sec. 71.22a & FACA Rec. This inventory has in fact been performed

² The FACA recommendations, Sec. 71.22a, instruct the agency to *include* in the inventory:

already. The Nature Conservancy’s Core Forests Analysis was consistent with the FACA recommendations’ direction for inventory. To meet its obligation to use the best available science, the Forest Service should reconsider areas that TNC did not consider to be fragmented, but which were somehow excluded from the inventory.

Furthermore, areas that have been proposed for consideration as recommended wilderness by the public during assessment also should be *included* in inventory, regardless of the presence of ML 2 roads. *See* FACA Rec., Sec. 71.22a (e). Importantly, even where the directives recognize limited circumstances where areas with ML 2 roads can be *excluded*, those exclusions do not pertain to areas that have been “proposed for consideration as recommended wilderness through public involvement during the assessment.” FACA Rec., Sec. 71.22a(1)(e). We specifically recommended in assessment that the NPNF consider The Wilderness Society’s guide to “North Carolina’s Mountain Treasures” (“MTAs”) as an important tool for evaluating potential wilderness designations.³ Therefore, MTAs with ML 2 should be *included* and not *excluded*.

Even if the potential exclusions in 71.22a(2) for certain ML 2 roads were applicable in these MTAs, here those exclusions were misapplied. ML 2 exclusions assume the roads have been actually “improved and are maintained by mechanical means to ensure relatively regular and continued use.” FACA Rec., Sec. 71.22a(2)(c). The reality is that there are many roads on the NPNF that are classified ML 2 but not maintained at that standard. (ML 2 roads, for example, should be passable by high clearance vehicles. FSH 7709.59; 62.3.) As an example, Courthouse Creek, FSR 140 B, a road with operational ML 2, had numerous problems including a large washed out culvert and trees and brush growing in the roadbed and clearly did not have maintenance in a decade or longer. It is the actual conditions of ML 2 roads, rather than the theoretical conditions, that drive whether they are included or excluded in the inventory under the exceptions. *Kettle Range Conservation Group v. Forest Service*, 971 F. Supp. 480 (D. Or. 1997) (holding that “it is the present ‘on-the-ground’ situation which determines whether an area is roadless or roaded for purposes of assessing compliance with NEPA”); *see also* FACA Rec., Sec. 71.22a(2)(discussing excluding roads “maintained” at actual levels, in terms of regular and continued use). Of equal import, the agency is instructed not to count roads (including ML 2) that have been identified for decommissioning in previous decision documents or travel analyses. *See* Sec. 71.22a (1)(b) & FACA Rec. Therefore, areas with roads set to be decommissioned by the Pisgah TAP or project-level decisions should not be excluded from the inventory.

Compounding these errors, the NPNF buffered all roads, including ML 2 roads that should not have been counted, by up to 1,000 feet (500 feet if the road was a boundary),

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- d. Areas in the eastern national forests with forest roads maintained to level 2 that are identified as closed to motor vehicle yearlong . . . [or]
 - e. Forest roads in areas that have been proposed for consideration as recommended wilderness through public involvement . . .

³ *See* Comments on the Assessment Phase of Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Land Resources Management Plan Revision at 48 (April 30, 2013).

further winnowing the areas for inventory. This is at odds with the approach outlined in the directives, which only address using setbacks at boundaries, and even then, only where necessary for future maintenance purposes. *See* Sec. 71.22b (11) (“It is appropriate to extend boundaries to the edges of development for purposes inclusion in the inventory.”), 73(1)(b) (“Setbacks should be used only where necessary for future maintenance of the human-made feature.”)

3. Vegetation management: The process followed by NPNF staff excluded areas with “substantially noticeable vegetation management” such as recent timber harvest, maintained wildlife openings, and managed balds. We understand vegetation management implemented in the last 30 years (using GIS data) was applied as a proxy for recent management activities. Importantly, the question for purposes of inventory is not whether timber harvest has occurred, but rather, whether the management is “substantially noticeable.” According to the directives, areas with “vegetation treatment” and “timber harvest” that are “not substantially noticeable” may be included. Sec. 71.22b. And indeed, this is part and parcel of the requirement to include areas despite their need for “passive or active restoration of wilderness character” due to human modification. *Id.* & FACA Rec. Instead, whether the treatment is “substantially noticeable” must be considered in light of the impact to the area *as a whole*. For example, in evaluating human modification through timber harvest, to compare, the 2007 directives instructed the Forest Service to determine whether greater than 20 percent of the area had been harvested in the last 10 years. Sec. 71.12 (7) (Eff. Jan. 31, 2001) (recognizing for eastern forests “that much, if not all of the land, shows some signs of human activity.”)

Eastern areas in the NPNF have been designated wilderness, even with recent timber harvest. Shining Rock Wilderness was administratively designated in 1964, despite a timber sale occurring within the boundaries in 1963 (Ugly Creek drainage).⁴ Similarly, it appears Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness experienced logging and road construction in the 1970s before its Congressional designation in 1975. In addition, many recent projects with timber harvest on the NPNF have been styled “restoration” projects. Because a stated aim of these management activities was to restore NRV in parts of the forest, they should not be used now to disqualify areas from the inventory. Finally, it is also unclear on what basis managed wildlife openings and balds should be automatically eliminated from inventory areas. Particularly as to wildlife openings, many of these are former temporary roads – areas which the directives explicitly contemplate would be *included* in inventory.

4. One-half mile width minimum: In its process, the NPNF adopted an ad-hoc “rule” that areas in the inventory needed to be at least one-half mile wide (Process, step 5). Based on this a number of “fingers” and “lobes” of less than ½ mile wide were excluded from the inventory, further reducing acreage. Neither the statute governing wilderness nor the directives require this exclusion. In any event, this is inconsistent with existing

⁴ Doug Scott, *The Enduring Wilderness* at 67 (citing Shining Rock Wild Areas – North Carolina: Proposal,” Southern Region, US Forest Service, 3).

wilderness areas on the NPNF: both Southern Nantahala and Shining Rock Wilderness have “fingers” that are less than ½ mile wide.

The result of these cumulative errors is that areas were prematurely excluded from the inventory. We ask that the NPNF correct these exclusions, and supplement the inventory, before proceeding with the evaluation. The Forest Service bears the responsibility to identify and inventory “all lands that may be suitable” as wilderness. Secs. 71.1; *see* 36 C.F.R. § 219.7(c)(2)(v). Congress ultimately determines whether to include those areas in the NWPS in light of the “urgent need to identify, study, designate, and preserve” wilderness “in the more populous eastern half of the United States.” Pub. L. No. 93-622 §2(a)(1)(Congressional findings supporting enactment of Eastern Wilderness Act). To reiterate, the question for the NPNF at inventory is whether the area *may* be suitable for designation as wilderness, not whether it *should* be so designated. Once the NPNF has a sufficiently broad inventory of potential wilderness, it can proceed with evaluating those areas.

B. Distinguishing the Inventory and Evaluation Processes

A sufficiently comprehensive inventory is required for the agency to carry out an effective evaluation of and recommendation for wilderness. The evaluation, however, must be completed for *all* potentially suitable lands, not just those lands the Forest Service considers worthy:

The primary function of the evaluation step is to comprehensively evaluate pursuant to criteria set forth in the Wilderness Act of 1964, the wilderness characteristics of each area identified during the inventory process The responsible official shall provide opportunities for public participation when evaluating lands identified in the inventory.

Sec. 72 & FACA Rec. Significantly, for all areas meeting the minimum size and improvements criteria, the public has a right to participate in the evaluation, and that right should not be eroded by a premature decision to exclude areas from the inventory.

For those areas inventoried by the agency but not (or not yet) designated as wilderness by Congress, the Forest Service must determine in the plan what management is appropriate. Of course, not all inventoried areas will ultimately be recommended for wilderness. Although the inventory is the pool from which any future wilderness candidates will come, there are other ways (than wilderness) to protect roadless characteristics – for example, backcountry recreation. Alternatively, it would be a “reasonable alternative” to manage newly inventoried roadless areas consistent with the direction for IRAs in the 2001 Roadless Rule. Some roadless areas may also be appropriate for one or more types of ecological restoration.

Because not all roadless areas require the same management, the evaluation process is designed to identify the particular values present in each area. First, the agency must consider the area’s “naturalness” and, conversely, the degree to which it may need passive or active restoration. Sec. 71.22b & FACA Rec. (recognizing that inventoried areas may need restoration) *with* Sec. 72.1 (considering the extent to which the area reflects natural ecological conditions). The evaluation also requires consideration of the degree to which the area offers opportunities

for solitude *or* primitive or unconfined recreation, explaining clearly that the area need only have one or the other attribute on some portion of its acreage. Sec. Ch. 72.1. Third, the agency must evaluate how an area smaller than 5,000 acres can be practicably preserved as wilderness. *Id.*

Beyond these basic requirements for wilderness, however, the evaluation also identifies other special features or values in each area, which in turn, will inform the determination of other appropriate designations.

These values are not required to be present in an area for the area to be recommended for inclusion in the NWPS, but their presence should be identified and evaluated where they exist. Such features or values may include:

- a. Rare plant or animal communities or rare ecosystems
- b. Outstanding landscape features such as waterfalls, mountains, viewpoints, water bodies, or geologic features.
- c. Historic and cultural resource sites....
- d. Research natural areas.
- e. High quality water resources or important watershed features.

Id. (4). This evaluation feeds directly into the inquiry for other potential designations--namely, whether an area has “outstanding natural characteristics or unique recreation or cultural values” (FSM 2372.03(1)) as discussed further below in connection with other administrative designations.⁵

C. NEPA Obligations to Consider Impacts on Roadless Areas

Beyond the requirements of the planning rule and directives, the agency must also consider the special features and values of each inventoried area in order to meet its NEPA obligations. The special values and features of these areas are inextricably tied to their relatively unfragmented condition, and they must therefore be considered in that context. Specifically, roadless areas should be properly inventoried and evaluated so that the relevant issues can be explored in the NEPA alternatives for the Plan.⁶

As discussed previously, the special features and values of roadless areas *may* be protected by recommending areas for wilderness, but they may also be protected by means of other designations or management. The directives recognize that inventoried lands may be protected with more than one kind of direction. Sec. 74 & FACA Rec. (requiring that the

⁵ See also 36 C.F.R. § 219.7 (requiring agency to identify any additional areas for designations other than wilderness, identify those areas as management areas or geographic areas, state desired conditions for those management or geographic areas, and identify the multiple uses for which those areas are suitable/unsuitable based on their desired conditions).

⁶ If the inventory and evaluation during planning resulted in an incomplete consideration of roadless impacts, the alternative would be to consider the direct and cumulative impacts to roadless values for each and every future project. See *Smith v. United States Forest Service*, 33 F.3d 1072, 1077-79 (9th Cir. 1994) (roadless inventory decisions and failure to consider impacts to roadless areas may be challenged in the context of a specific project).

decision document recognize inventoried lands not recommended as wilderness and describe the chosen management direction for those areas). Regardless of the final decision, these features and values *must* be taken into account as the agency selects the range of alternatives by which adverse environmental impacts will be avoided and minimized. 40 C.F.R. § 1502.1 (EIS “shall inform decisionmakers and the public of the reasonable alternatives which would avoid or minimize adverse impacts or enhance the quality of the human environment.”); Sec. Ch. 73 (agency’s NEPA analysis is based on information in the evaluation of each area).

Fundamentally, the special features and values of roadless areas are not merely paper considerations; they are real environmental conditions on the Nantahala and Pisgah forests. Roadless areas, according to the Forest Service:

[P]rovide clean drinking water and function as biological strongholds for populations of threatened and endangered species. They provide large, relatively undisturbed landscapes that are important to biological diversity and the long-term survival of many at-risk species. Inventoried roadless areas provide opportunities for dispersed outdoor recreation, opportunities that diminish as open space and natural settings are developed elsewhere. They also serve as bulwarks against the spread of non-native invasive plant species and provide reference areas for study and research.

66 Fed. Reg. 3244, 3244-45. Many of these areas also contain culturally important sites and exceptional hunting and fishing opportunities. *Id.*

These values may be profoundly impacted by management activities, including but not limited to road building and logging. Indeed, the Forest Service’s Roadless Area Conservation Rule, which applies to previously inventoried roadless areas, was premised on this very fact:

[R]oad construction, reconstruction, and timber harvest ... have the greatest likelihood of altering and fragmenting landscapes, resulting in immediate, long-term loss of roadless area values and characteristics. [O]ther activities may also compromise roadless area values

Id. at 3244. Such activities, accordingly, *may not be undertaken* without full consideration of their site-specific and cumulative impacts and a comparison of the impacts of other reasonable alternatives. 40 C.F.R. §§ 1502.16; 1508.8. *See also California v. Block*, 690 F.2d 753 (9th Cir. 1981). If the revised plan EIS fails to properly inventory roadless areas (and therefore fails to identify their special features and values in the evaluation and consider an appropriate range of alternatives to protect those values in the analysis), future project-level analyses will not be able to “tier” to the Plan analysis.

Stated differently, if areas are improperly excluded from the inventory and consequently are allocated to management areas without consideration of the special values and features associated with their unroaded status, then these values and features would have to be considered in connection with any project that threatens to impact them. Each future project would be required to conduct its own analysis of the site-specific impacts to a roadless area, including consideration of that area’s particular values and features, and the cumulative impacts of the

project and reasonably foreseeable projects (i.e., all the projects envisioned by the Plan) on those values across the landscape. *Smith*, 33 F.3d at 1077-79 (roadless inventory may be challenged in the context of a specific project); *Kettle Range Conservation Group v. Forest Service*, 971 F. Supp. 480 (D. Or. 1997) (same).⁷ Furthermore, unless tiered to an analysis based on a complete inventory in the plan, a project's analysis would likely require an EIS, because long-term impacts to roadless values are significant.⁸ Obviously, this level of analysis would be unwieldy for a specific project. That is precisely why the agency's inventory and analysis should follow the steps and criteria described in the directives, in order to comport with NEPA obligations now.

D. Recommended Revisions to Inventory List

For the reasons outlined above, we urge the NPNF to expand its inventory list at this stage, to assure a sufficiently broad analysis that comports with its obligations under the wilderness act and NEPA. Below we provide specific recommendations to the NPNF "Inventory of Potential Additional to Wilderness – Draft 4/14/2014":

1. **Slide Hollow** is a 4,286 acre Inventoried Roadless Area ("IRA"). For the reasons explained above, absolutely all IRAs should be included in the inventory. This area was inventoried because it met the definition of wilderness, and it has since been protected by the Roadless Rule. We fail to see how its size, if not disqualifying in the past, now justifies excluding it. In addition to the previous inventory determination that it meets the size criterion, this area contains some remarkable features and values, including the Elk River, which is deemed eligible for Wild and Scenic River designation, the Appalachian Trail, headwater streams, and several charismatic waterfalls, including Twisting Falls.
2. **Nolichucky** is an area which was whittled down by improper exclusions. When considered with the contiguous roadless expanse in the Cherokee National Forest and without the exclusion of areas with ML 2 roads, it is certainly large enough for inclusion. It is also sufficiently intact, because small areas of previous management and the presence of wildlife openings are not disqualifying for purposes of the inventory, as explained above. This area should be protected for its special values, including shale barrens rare communities. Like Slide Hollow, this area also contains an eligible Wild and Scenic River candidate.
3. **Bluff Mountain**, including the contiguous expanse on the Cherokee and using the Partridge Gap Road, CNF road 96b, the utility corridor, and inholdings as boundaries, contains at least 2,600 intact roadless acres. Additionally, the Catpen project was not a timber production harvest, but was instead intended as a pilot project to improve habitat for native wildlife, consistent with the natural disturbance regime of the area. Bluff

⁷ See also *Sierra Club v. Austin*, 82 F. App'x 570, 572-73 (2003) (analysis was inadequate because Forest Service "did not reference the impact of logging on unroaded areas contiguous to IRAs.").

⁸ See 36 C.F.R. 220.5(a)(2) ("Proposals that would substantially alter the undeveloped character of an inventoried roadless area or a potential wilderness area" will ordinarily require an EIS); *Smith*, 33 F.3d at 1077-79 (holding that while an EIS may not be *per se* required, "the decision to harvest timber in a 5,000 acre roadless area is environmentally significant."); *Lands Council v. Martin*, 529 F.3d 1219, 1231 (extending *Smith* to areas less than 5,000 acres).

Mountain is rugged, has high quality forest, rare species, headwater streams, and is important to the experience of Appalachian Trail hikers. While this area may not ultimately be recommended for wilderness, these values must be considered in the evaluation process so that these values are properly protected, perhaps in an AT management area.

4. **Bearwallow**, like Slide Hollow, is an IRA containing 4,100 acres. This area must be included in the inventory. It contains an important area of spruce forest habitat, rare species, and outstanding opportunities for primitive recreation, with important trails like the Mountains to Sea Trail and Buncombe Horse Range Ridge. If not recommended as wilderness, these values might also be protected (and the area's overall natural condition improved) by including it in a spruce restoration designation or management area.
5. **Daniel Ridge** is one of the most troubling omissions in the inventory. Its remarkable values and features include stunning views from the Blue Ridge Parkway, popular waterfalls, rare species and rare communities, extraordinary old growth spruce and northern red oak forests, and cultural sites. Rather than recognize and evaluate these outstanding values, this area was whittled down with improper criteria. The agency used improper buffers along roads and the campground area, ignoring the directives' admonition to "extend [inventory] boundaries to the edges of development." Error was piled upon error by applying the ½ mile width requirement to the improperly narrowed area. Without improper buffers, there is no problem meeting the ½ mile standard, but, even if there was, the ½ mile requirement appears nowhere in the definition of wilderness and is inconsistent with existing wilderness areas, including areas in the NPNF. We also question whether some roads were improperly used as disqualifying features. The last 1.8 miles of FSR 5031 to Farlow Gap is now at D0 maintenance. A very conservative size estimate for Daniel Ridge is 6,200 roadless acres running from Seinarid Ridge to Mill Station Creek, even allowing for the exclusion of ML 2 roads (which, as explained above, we believe is inappropriate during the inventory, especially considering that recent examination shows that most ML 2 roads in the area are not "regularly maintained and used"). Notably, too, this area has little need for prescribed fire, suggesting even less need for roaded access.
6. **Santeetlah Headwaters** is another very conspicuous omission from the inventory. The Santeetlah Headwaters includes over 1,200 acres of primary forest, most acquired at the same time and of similar condition to Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest. Rare species in the area include the federally listed rock gnome lichen, Indiana bat, and Carolina Northern Flying Squirrel, and globally rare species Clingman's hedge nettle and Smoky Mountain manna grass. Streams in the area harbor some of the world's strongest Southern Appalachian brook trout populations. Despite these remarkable values, this area was excluded because of the improper and arbitrary size limit, the counting of ML2 roads as disqualifying features, and the lack of consideration of current road conditions. Even if ML 2 roads were considered disqualifying features where they are regularly maintained and used, (a screening criterion which is not at all supported by the FACA recommendations, see discussion above at 3-4), it is the *actual condition* of the roads (not the intended maintenance level) which matters for purposes of inventory. Many of the roads within the boundary are not currently passable, lacking infrastructure, such as

bridges, that would make passage possible. Disregarding ML 2 roads, moreover, would yield a much larger area. In addition, while the inventory notes do cite the presence of mowed fields, we also wonder whether mowed areas were considered disqualifying. These areas do not detract from the natural character of the area, and the agency's desire to maintain these mowed fields in the future is emphatically not a reason to exclude the area from the inventory. Santeetlah Bluffs is already designated and its current designation would be protective if carried forward, but it must be included in the inventory so that the public has a chance to weigh in on its evaluation.

7. **Fishhawk Mountain** is rugged, inoperable from a timber standpoint, has well documented geologic hazards (e.g., Peeks Creek and historical slope failures on Tessentee Creek), some of the world's best Cedar-Hardwood Woodlands, rare species, and the wild character of the area is important to the experience of Bartram Trail hikers. The area was excluded because of its size, but it is of comparable size to other existing wilderness, even with the exclusion of the inholding access. As noted previously, it is improper to use a buffer to bordering roads for purposes of the inventory.
8. **Overflow** is both an IRA and a congressionally designated wilderness study area, and its recommendation for wilderness is supported by a local resolution from the town of Highlands. In other words, this area's potential suitability as wilderness has been recognized not only by the agency, but also by Congress itself—the final decisionmaker on wilderness designation. We are aware of no reason that this wilderness candidate should have been omitted from the potential wilderness inventory. The failure to include this area in the inventory points to serious flaws in the process used to conduct this initial inventory. In particular, if the agency's interpretation of the size criterion excludes Overflow, then that interpretation cannot be correct.
9. **Terrapin Mountain** was disqualified because of its size after excluding inholdings. The area north of the inholdings, however, should qualify for inventory regardless of its size. This area is a stand-alone granitic dome, and easily meets the wilderness definition's test as a geological feature practicable for preservation in its current size and configuration. It contains rare communities and a portion overlaps with the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River corridor.
10. **Siler Bald** is a good example of an area that was improperly excluded because of the presence of wildlife openings, vegetation management, and low-standard roads. The existence of these features in a GIS database should not disqualify the area. Instead, as noted elsewhere in these comments, it is the actual condition of the area that matters. The vegetation management is not substantially noticeable in the context of the broader area, especially in light of the sorts of recent vegetation management included when other wilderness areas were designated. The use of the roads as disqualifying features, in addition, is problematic because ML 2 roads should not be disqualifying. If the agency considers the bald area to be disqualifying, we emphatically object. Far from being a detraction from naturalness, the bald is one of this area's outstanding features. Those features also include a beloved and remote portion of the AT corridor and rare species habitat.

11. **Ash Cove** was disqualified because it did not meet an arbitrary ½ mile width requirement or the agency’s unreasonable interpretation of the size requirement. First, the size and width problems appear to have resulted from the exclusions of wildlife openings and vegetation, which are themselves problematic for the reasons explained previously. Second, even assuming those exclusions were proper, the “finger” of this area should not have been cut off; there is no ½ mile width requirement and other areas in the NPNF (like the Southern Nantahala) have narrow fingers. Third, if the finger is not cut off, the area should be of sufficient size even using the NPNF’s flawed interpretation of the size criterion. Moreover, regardless of acreage, it would be practicable to preserve this area, which contains the intact watershed of an outstanding resource water.

In addition to these stand-alone areas that should have been included in the inventory, several areas were improperly reduced in size.

12. **Cheoah Bald** was reduced in size by over 1,600 acres from its IRA size by the use of FSRs 515, 523, and 659 as disqualifying road features. ML 2 roads should not have been considered disqualifying features. Even so, the portions of these roads within the roadless area do not receive regular maintenance and use, and large sections are impassable. These roads are not shown on the maps, and were not used as disqualifying features, for the 1995-1996 roadless inventory. In fact, these roads do not show up as roads on the road system from the mid-1990s at all (Southern Appalachian Assessment data CD #1; 1996). The Cheoah Bald area is a premier recreation area containing two long trails: the Appalachian Trail and the Bartram Trail as well as spectacular views and remaining old growth forest. The area was once a very large roadless area (over 24,000 acres during RARE II) but has been whittled down with each new inventory because its roadless values have been systematically ignored. The remaining qualifying area should not be again neglected in this inventory.
13. **Pigeon River Gorge** inventoried area should include the Runyon Ridge area and the AT. FSR 3580 is not regularly maintained and used, and it accesses unsuitable MA 5 lands. This area contains old growth and serves as a critical wildlife corridor between GSMNP and the main Appalachian Mountain chain.
14. **Craggy Mountain Extension** inventoried area should include the lobe extending to the Blue Ridge Parkway with Walker Ridge, Walker Falls area, and High Knob area. FSR 5548 should not be disqualifying because it is a ML 2 road and, at any rate, because it is not regularly maintained and used. Alternatively, this area should be considered as a separate stand-alone area. Either way, the outstanding values for this larger area must be properly considered. This area is in the top three areas in the planning area for old growth and rare communities. It also contains remarkable waterfalls and overlooks and outstanding recreation opportunities including the Mountains to Sea Trail. Its proximity to the Blue Ridge Parkway is another important factor to be considered in evaluation. Furthermore, it has a low need for fire, and there is strong local support for permanent protection.
15. It was appropriate to expand the **Mackey Mountain** area beyond the current IRA boundaries, but the inventory should also include the area along Mackey Creek. The

system road shown in this area is not regularly maintained and used based on recent field examination: the road is impassable and has not been maintained in any recent timeframe. The inventoried area should also extend to the Blue Ridge Parkway; the strip used to exclude this area is not any narrower than strips included in other IRAs and designated wilderness areas. This entire area is outstanding for many reasons: it provides unrivaled solitude, harbors significant old growth, comprises a remarkable part of the Parkway's viewshed, contains notable waterfalls including Clear Creek and Mackey Creek, is home to significant rare communities and rare plants like sweet fern and turkey beard, and it boasts historical significance as part of the first purchase under the Weeks Act. Many of these values are enhanced and protected by the relative intactness of the broader roadless area, and the entire area should therefore be inventoried.

16. **Woods Mountain** inventoried area should extend up Pup Ridge to the Blue Ridge Parkway. To the extent wildlife openings were used to exclude this area, please refer to the discussion above. The Woods Mountain area contains remarkable viewsheds and recreation opportunities on the Blue Ridge Parkway and Mountains to Sea Trail, rare species (such as mountain golden heather), populations of ginseng which would be endangered by increased roaded access, and important headwater streams.
17. **Laurel Mountain** inventoried area should not have excluded contiguous roadless portions of the Cradle of Forestry. If this is part of a roadless area it should be included in the roadless inventory; the current designation is irrelevant.
18. The additional inventory of the **Southern Nantahala Extensions** failed to include important qualifying areas. First, on Chunky Gal Mountain, the boundary should extend to Highway 64. The private inholding used to disqualify Riley Knob is owned by Land Trust for the Little Tennessee and is slated for transfer to the Forest Service. Second, the Yellow Mountain area should also be inventoried. Even if FSR 71D is considered to be a disqualifying road (which is dubious), this addition is contiguous with existing wilderness. In other words, it does not need to be a part of the "Chunky Gal Addition" in order to be inventoried as a wilderness addition. Third, the Barker's Creek Extension should be expanded to near Mulberry Gap and should include Commissioner's Creek headwaters, Deer Gap and Doubletop Mountain. This area was improperly excluded from analysis because of the arbitrary 1/2 mile rule. Doubletop should be included because FSR 421C is not currently driveable beyond Rich Mountain and 421B is also in poor repair with no evidence of regular maintenance and use. Neither should be considered fragmenting with the adjacent Dryman Fork drainage, which is the reference watershed in the Coweeta Hydrological Laboratory. While Coweeta is already designated, the reference management of Dryman Fork is consistent with conditions suitable for potential wilderness and increases the wilderness character of the Doubletop Mountain area. Doubletop and Rich Mountain both harbor excellent examples of mafic cliff and Cedar-Hardwood Woodland natural communities. Fourth, Little Indian should extend around the northwest corner of the existing wilderness. FSR 7219 and FSR 67J are not regularly maintained and used, as revealed by recent field examination.
19. **Tusquitee Bald** inventoried area should extend further toward Big Stamp and the Laurel Creek inholding. FSR 427 and FSR 427A are not regularly maintained and used, and so

should not be disqualifying. Properly inventoried, this area would likely contain approximately 4,000 more acres. This entire area is important for recreation, including a premier backpacking loop on the Rim Trail. It provides the headwaters for Fires Creek, an Outstanding Resource Water and trout stream, and shelters a number of rare species. It is also exceptionally significant as an area with a number of cultural sites.

II. Other Designated Areas

In addition to the wilderness inventory and evaluation discussed above, the NPNF also must determine whether areas with unique and special values should receive special consideration in the Forest Plan with administrative designations. An administratively “designated area” is “an area or feature identified and managed to maintain its unique special character or purpose.” 36 C.F.R. § 219.19. During plan revision, the Forest Service must “[(1) identify existing designated areas . . . and (2) determine whether to recommend any additional areas for designation.” 36 C.F.R. § 219.7(c)(2)(vii). The revised plan must include “standards or guidelines, to provide for . . . appropriate management of [] designated areas or recommended designated areas.” 36 C.F.R. § 219.10(b)(vi). “Appropriate management” does not exclude types of management but requires management activities to be completed in a way that does not “interfere with the primary values for which the area was established nor negatively affect the visitor’s experience.” FSM 2372.4(8).⁹ Stated differently, “other use may be permitted in these areas, to the extent that these uses are in harmony with the purpose for which the area was designated.” Forest Service PowerPoint (April 17, 2014).

The NPNF has identified 40 designated special interest areas currently protected. As an initial matter, it is agency policy that these areas be carried forward during plan revision. *See* FSH 1909.12, § 22.22 (“The intent behind identifying designated areas in plans” is, in part, to “[a]ssure that plans identify *previously existing areas* that Congress, the Department, the Agency, or other Federal Agencies ha[ve] established”)(emphasis added). The assumption is a designated area would only become undesignated “when the designation is no longer appropriate,” which must be supported by “an analysis of the rescission in the forest plan.” FSM 2372.2, 2372.03. We are unaware of any reason that any special values or uses currently protected under the plan should lose their protections, and the NPNF has not supplied any rationale to lessen protections on the forest. Indeed, if special values have been diminished in designated areas, the NPNF should consider how to strengthen protections rather than reducing or eliminating them. As we have written elsewhere, recreation demand, the heightened importance of visual quality to the tourism economy, and increasing development and fragmentation of the lands surrounding the NPNF all support maintaining current designations to protect important multiple uses, local economies, ecological integrity (including connectivity), diversity of habitat, and to ensure resiliency to climate change and other stressors. In short, currently designated areas retain the special and unique qualities for which they were originally designated and should be carried forward in the next plan.

⁹ Forest Service directives point to FSM 2372 for guidance on administratively designated areas. FSH 1909.12, Ch. 20, Sec. 22.22, Ex. 1.

The Forest Service must assess whether additional areas of the forest should be designated during plan revision. *See* 36 C.F.R. § 219.7(c)(2)(vii). Generally, the agency is to “[d]esignate or recommend administrative designations of special areas with outstanding natural characteristics or unique recreation or cultural values.” FSM 2372.03(1). Without exclusion, the agency can designate an area as a botanical area, geological area, historical area, paleontological area, recreational area, scenic area, or zoological area. *See* Sec. 22.21, FSM 2372.05.

A. The Forest Service’s Proposed Criteria

The NPNF proposed four criteria to evaluate potential new designations, as set forth in a handout at the April 17, 2014, public meeting. We are concerned that the criteria proposed by the agency will insufficiently assess the need for specific designations. We believe the best approach is for the NPNF to follow the amplification of the rule offered in the draft directives, instead of trying to create its own criteria which may not fulfill the intent of the rule. As to the specific criterion offered by the NPNF, we offer the following.

The first NPNF criterion is whether “[t]he area has an abundance of unique attributes such as botanical, zoological, geologic, scenic, recreational experiences.” The criterion suggests that an area needs attributes of multiple categories (botanical, zoological, geologic, etc.) to be designated. Applying the criterion in that way would be inconsistent with the new planning rule and the Forest Service Manual which discretely defines each type of designated area. *See* FSH 1909.12, Ch. 20 § 22.21, FSM 2372.05. As an example, the Manual defines a “geological area” as “a unit of land with outstanding formations or unique geological features of the earth’s development such as caves, fossils, dikes, cliffs, or faults.” FSM 2372.05(2). By definition, botanical or zoological attributes, for example, are unnecessary, if stand-alone “geological features” warrant designation.

Similarly, we are concerned that the term “abundance” suggests a higher standard than can be found in any rule or directive. None of the definitions of designated areas include a requirement that there be an “abundance” of attributes. In fact, some explicitly reject that assertion. *See* FSM 2372.05(5) (A designated “historical area” is a unit of land possessing *a* [singular] significant site . . .). Others implicitly reject it. A “botanical area,” for example, is a “unit of land that contains plant specimens, plant groups, *or* plant communities that are significant because of their form, color, occurrence, habitat, location, life history, arrangement, ecology, rarity, *or* other features.” *Id.* at (3) (emphases added). A unit of land that contains highly rare plant specimens in low abundance would easily meet this definition and such an area should be considered for special designation.

We believe this criterion could be improved, and more closely reflect applicable guidance, by clarifying that an area need only be significant for one category (botanical, zoological, geologic, etc.) to qualify for designation and by removing the requirement for an “abundance” of attributes.

The second NPNF criterion is whether “[t]he area’s unique attributes are currently underrepresented in existing designated areas.” Importantly, this criterion is only valid if amended to incorporate an all-lands approach, in other words, under-representation must be evaluated in the broader landscape – not just on the forest itself. “The intent behind identifying

designated areas in a plan . . . is to recommend areas where doing so would help carry out the distinctive role and contributions of the plan area *in the broader landscape* or contribute to achieving desired conditions *for the plan area.*” FSH 1909.12, Sec. 22.22 (emphasis added). Like other elements of forest planning, special designations are meant to occur within the context of an all lands approach. The evaluation must consider the prevalence of unique attributes across the forest as a whole and on those private and public lands in close surrounding the forests.

The third NPNF criterion is whether the area “requires specific direction for maintaining or protecting the unique features that are intrinsic to the area.” This criterion risks conflating designations with management direction in the plan. Areas receive special designation solely based on whether they have “outstanding natural characteristics or unique recreation or cultural values.” FSM 2372.03(1)(describing Forest Service “policy” for “areas designated administratively”). The specificity of management ultimately required is separate from the decision to designate an area. *See* FSH 1909.12, Sec. 22.22 (“some designations do not need unique plan components”). Only after areas are designated is “appropriate management” assigned. *See* 36 C.F.R. § 219.10(b)(vi). That management however may be the same or similar to management on surrounding undesignated lands as long as it sufficiently protects the unique values for which the area was designated.

Focusing on whether a change in management will be required as a basis to decide *whether* to designate at all also misses an important function of designations. Designations highlight special areas on the forest for the public. For that reason, the process of determining the “desirability” of new designations must take public input on specific places into account. Recognition of an area’s unique values through designation furthers the agency objective of managing these areas for “public use and enjoyment.” FSM 2372.02. Whether a change in management is required is separate from and unrelated to the uniqueness of an area that warrants designation for public enjoyment. Accordingly, this criterion should be excluded.

The final NPNF criterion is whether “[d]esignation of the area is responsive to a specific need on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests.” We agree with this criterion in principle, in that it comports with the NPNF inquiry into whether there is need and desirability for the designation. *See* FSM 2372.2 . However, we question the utility of the questionnaire distributed by the Forest Service at the April 17 specifically inviting participants to identify concerns with designating areas. Presumably this document was intended, at least in part, to assess the need for designated areas.

As a preliminary matter, rather than deducing need for designations on the forest, the questionnaire included statements likely to perpetuate misunderstandings about designations, which is not particularly useful for apprising need based upon best available science. For example, inviting concerns about “less access to parts of the forest” grants legitimacy to this concern by presenting it as a possible consequence of all designations, when in fact many designations are designed to support values compatible with access and enjoyment (scenic, recreational, biological). Other concerns, such as the connection between designations and ESH, are also unsubstantiated and appear to contradict other statements made by the NPNF, which acknowledge more designations can co-exist with management activities and multiple uses. *See* PowerPoint (“Other uses may be permitted in these areas,” including ESH creation, as long as it is “in harmony with the purpose for which the area was designated”).

Asking participants to voice concerns over “increasing the *number* of special designations” also asks the wrong question. The need for specific designations is not at all driven by the sum total of different types of designations across the forest, but rather, the inquiry is targeted to whether specific areas meet specific requirements for individual designations. For instance, the “need” for a scenic or recreation area designation should be based on documented benefits, demands, and/or drawbacks from such a designation. The “need” for a botanical or zoological designation should be based on the documented presence of nationally, state-wide, or locally rare and unique species. Ultimately, consideration of the “need” for designations must be based on actual, substantiated data and information – not reinforcement of misinformation or speculation.

B. Potential Designated Areas

Although the NPNF criteria in amended form may yield potentially useful information, the heart of the inquiry the NPNF must undertake remains the same – to evaluate “special areas with outstanding natural characteristics or unique recreation of cultural values” and consider the need to designate those areas based on substantiated data before the agency. *See* FSM 2372.2 (Designation must include “an analysis of the need and desirability for special areas”). Like the wilderness inventory mentioned above, this is essentially a two-step process: 1) Does the area meet the definition of a designated area? If so, 2) Is there a need to designate the area to “protect and manage for public use and enjoyment” based on the reliable data before the agency? FSM 2372.02.

We have previously recommended specific designations through prior comments, either as administrative designations or for inclusion in the wilderness inventory. For a general discussion of those recommendations, including some not captured in these comments, *see* our Assessment Comments (April 30, 2013) at 48-58; Need for Change Comments (Dec. 18, 2013) at 28-33. Below we offer the following additional comments areas worthy of designations.

1. *Botanical/Zoological Areas - State Natural Heritage Areas*

The current plan recognizes 40 special interest areas previously identified as ecologically or culturally significant by the North Carolina Heritage Program. The heritage program has identified 36 new areas that should receive special designations in the revised plan, in addition to those areas already designated. *See* Letter from Misty Buchanan to Ruth Berner (April 28, 2014). These areas contain either globally imperiled or globally critically imperiled species, and fall within the definition of botanical and zoological designated areas. *See* FSM 2372.05. As globally imperiled species, there is a demonstrable need for their protection in the new forest plan.¹⁰

2. *Scenic Areas*

A designated scenic area is a “unit of land with outstanding natural beauty that requires special management to preserve this beauty.” FSM 2372.05(1). There are areas of the NPNF

¹⁰ We join the heritage program in welcoming truly restorative management, to the extent it does not conflict with other appropriate designations, in these areas.

that are more susceptible to public concern over viewshed impacts. Additionally, certain viewsheds are disproportionately important to local economies. Places which meet these criteria, two areas in particular, warrant special management direction in the Forest Plan as designated scenic areas.

First, the NPNF has made an open commitment to the conservation community and to the public to evaluate the potential for an administrative designation of the scenic viewshed encompassed by the proposed Grandfather National Scenic Area. While recognition as a “national scenic area” must come from Congress, the Forest Service should recognize the viability of such a designation and manage the area accordingly under the revised plan. The Grandfather viewshed is vital to local economies, drawing millions of tourists annually. A scenic administrative designation would also serve additional purposes by encompassing a range of high priority biological and recreational resources. For additional information on the “need” for special designation of this area see Wild South’s *Protecting the Carolina High Country’s Future: The Benefits of a Grandfather National Scenic Area*, attached to our Assessment comments.

Second, the NPNF should create a special scenic designation or management area for the viewshed of the Blue Ridge Parkway. The Parkway is the most visited unit administered by the National Park Service and a major driver of western North Carolina’s economy. A decline in the value of the viewshed along the Parkway could cost western North Carolina over \$5 billion. See Assessment Comments at 56. Data is readily available revealing which areas of the Parkway are most susceptible to viewshed impacts and which are most frequented and iconic. This data could easily be combined to map those areas of the Parkway viewshed which would most benefit from a scenic area special designation, thereby enhancing the protection for this economic driver. In fact, such an analysis has been completed on the Jefferson National Forest, resulting in a management prescription for the Blue Ridge Parkway viewshed.

3. *Recreation Areas*

A designated recreation area is a “unit of land that has been administratively designated for particular recreation opportunities or activities such as hiking, rock hounding, recreational mining, photography, or other special activity.” FSM 2372.01(7). Similar to the GNSA, the Forest Service should consider administratively designating all or parts of the Pisgah Ranger District as a recreation area and ultimately recommend for Congressional approval as a National Recreation Area. The Pisgah District, as discussed in other comments we have submitted, receives an enormous amount of recreational use and should be appropriately designated to reduce multiple use conflicts and appropriately focus limited agency budgets. Recognizing the unparalleled recreational use in this area, and building management activities and budget around that reality, will reduce future conflicts and better protect resources.

4. *Botanical Areas - Old Growth*

Old growth patches fit within the definition of “botanical areas” which are “units of land that contain plant specimens . . . that are significant because of their form, [], occurrence, habitat, [] life history, [], ecology [and] rarity.” FSM 2732.05(3). Old growth areas designated under the

current plan are “designated areas” within the meaning of the revised planning rule (*see* 36 CFR § 219.19) and Forest Manual (*see* FSM 2372.03(2)) and should be carried forward.

Failure to carry these designations forward would undermine the long-term strategy for old growth on the forest for decades, under Region Eight guidance. The “centerpiece of the regional guidance for conserving old-growth communities is a network of old-growth areas.” Region Eight Old Growth Guidance at 15. Regional guidance directs that the plan include large, medium and small patch areas for management as future old growth. As the Forest Service often underscores during project review, old growth is not merely a collection of old trees, but a functioning community. The need served by old growth designated areas in the current plan, and the Region Eight Old Growth Guidance, has not abated in the past two decades. Restoration of old growth community structure can require generations to achieve—much longer than the planning period for a single forest plan.

Furthermore, the NPNF has frequently designated old growth as mitigating environmental commitments at the project level or as resolution of project appeals. These areas, already agreed to by the agency, must be carried forward in the revised Plan. In general, any decision to abandon long-term commitments of management direction with respect to long-term goals (like old growth) would be ill-advised and must be supported with full consideration of the cumulative impacts of that decision in light of past projects that were shepherded through environmental review on the assumption, and public assurance, that other areas in the forest would be managed in the long term as designated old growth patches. For additional information on the old growth designation under the current plan see our Assessment Comments at 51.

In compliance with Region Eight’s *Guidance for Conserving and Restoring Old Growth Forest Communities on National Forests in the Southern Region: Report of the Region 8 Old-Growth Team*, existing old growth not designated under the current plan must also be identified and considered for administrative designation in the revised plan. Administratively designating areas of old growth serves the critical need of protecting these “rare or largely absent” ecosystems in the southern Appalachians. *See* Region Eight Guidance, at 1. The Plan must require identification and appropriate protection of existing old growth at the project level.

5. *Historical Areas*

A designated historical area is “unit of land possessing a significant site, or a concentration of sites . . . united historically or prehistorically by plan or physical development.” FSM 2372.05(6). Much of the NPNF is the ancestral homeland of the Cherokee Indians. To preserve that heritage, as well invite the public to connect with the history of the Cherokee people, the Forest Service should consider a special designation for prominent Cherokee Trails as identified by Wild South or, alternatively, management area standards to protect and emphasize this trail system. For further information on Cherokee Trails *see* Wild South’s *Cherokee Trails and Cultural Heritage Prescription in Pisgah-Nantahala National Forest* (Aug. 16, 2013); Need for Change Comments (Dec. 18, 2013) at 22-23.

6. *Wild and Scenic Rivers*

During Plan revision the Forest Service must “[i]dentify the eligibility of rivers for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, unless a systematic inventory has been previously completed and documented and there are no changed circumstances that warrant additional review.” 36 C.F.R. § 219.7(vi). The identification of administratively designated areas specially considers areas designated for wilderness and areas designated as wild and scenic rivers. *See* 36 C.F.R. § 219.7(vii). While we understand that the agency seeks to assess inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System at a later date, we are concerned that this assessment will not be completed in time to inform the administrative designation of areas. It seems reasonable to conduct all three of these analyses (wilderness, wild and scenic river, administrative designation) concurrently particularly in light of the agency’s “Need for Change” statement which lumps all three of these designations together. *See* 79 Fed. Reg. 13,984 (Mar. 12, 2014). As we await the time for public engagement and collaboration on wild and scenic river evaluation, we point you to our previous comments on this issue. *See* Assessment Comments (April 30, 2013) at 57; Need for Change Comments at 33 (Dec. 18, 2013).

C. Designations: Additional Considerations

As discussed above, administrative designations may also be appropriate for areas with unique or special characteristics which were considered as part of the wilderness inventory and evaluation but ultimately not recommended for wilderness designation. Many of these largely undisturbed areas will have the “outstanding natural characteristics or unique recreation or cultural values” required for administrative designation. FSM 2372.03(1). As discussed above, the evaluation of each inventoried area will yield an identification of its special values and features. Sec. 1909.12, Ch. 72. Management for these areas must take those special values into account, which may require an administrative designation.

Relatedly, the agency is required under NEPA to evaluate how to protect these special values. The Plan EIS (as opposed to project level analyses) is well suited for that task. To meet its NEPA obligations during the planning process, the NPNF must consider potential impacts to the “outstanding natural characteristics or unique recreation or cultural values” of administratively designated or potentially designated areas. Those impacts must be assessed and documented in forest plan alternatives. Failure to consider appropriate alternatives (including administrative designations) to protect these values will necessitate a cumbersome level of analysis for future projects, in which each individual project will be left with the burden of assessing the “outstanding natural characteristics or unique recreation or cultural values” of the project area to meet its obligation to take a “hard look” at the environmental impacts of a proposed action. In short, designating special areas as part of the plan revision will reduce future conflicts over individual projects by documenting those places on the forest where special characteristics exist and assigning appropriate protections for those characteristics which will guide project-level decisions.

Finally, we disagree with the NPNF’s conclusory assertions, made at the April 17 meeting, that “many of the Forest’s distinctive areas were identified in the original plan” and that it did not “believe we need to add vast acreages of new designated areas.” Forest Service PowerPoint. One of the major functions of updating the plan is to determine whether there is a need for change based upon updated information and best available science. Two major changes have occurred since the initial inventory of potential designated places. First, the

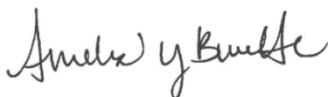
recreation and the concomitant emphasis on scenic values has changed dramatically since the last plan revision. We've discussed the increase in recreational use in comments submitted to the Forest Service previously. *See* Need for Change comments at 23-28 (Dec. 18, 2013). The result is that those areas designated as "recreation" areas may no longer be adequate to meet current recreation demand. The Forest Service must take into account the increase in the number of recreational users of the forest when considering whether to administratively designate recreational areas in the new plan.

The second major change is an overall improvement in data. Over the last twenty-five years, the data collected by various state and federal agencies regarding plant and animal species across the forest has improved dramatically. The result is that agencies such as the heritage program have been able to identify *globally* imperiled/critically imperiled species across the forest that were unknown at the time of the last plan. These findings should be embraced and the species should be protected through updated administrative or other designation, regardless of the area's status in the prior plan.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, we appreciate the opportunity to submit comments on the NPNF draft inventory of potential additions to wilderness and special designations criteria. We look forward to continuing to work with the Forest Service throughout the planning process.

Sincerely,



Amelia Y. Burnette
Senior Attorney



Austin D.J. Gerken
Senior Attorney



Patrick Hunter
Associate Attorney



Sam Evans
Associate Attorney

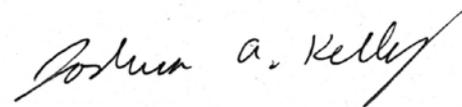
Southern Environmental Law Center
22 South Pack Square, Suite 700
Asheville, NC 28801
(828) 258-2023
aburnette@selcnc.org

djgerken@selcnc.org
sevans@selcnc.org
phunter@selcnc.org

On behalf of:



Hugh Irwin
Landscape Conservation Planner
The Wilderness Society
P.O. Box 817
Black Mountain, NC 28711
828-357-5187
hugh_irwin@tws.org



Josh Kelly
Staff Biologist
Western North Carolina Alliance
29 North Market Street, Suite 610
Asheville, NC 28801
828-258-8737
josh@wnca.org



Ben Prater
Associate Director
Wild South
16 Eagle St., Suite 200
Asheville, NC 28801
828-258-2667
ben@wildsouth.org

cc: Ruth Berner, Forest Planner
Heather Luczak, Assistant Forest Planner

Fish and Wildlife Conservation Council



2700 Flat Creek Valley Road, Lake Toxaway, NC 28747

“Promoting the Conservation of Fish & Wildlife on our National Forests”

May 12, 2014

Kristin Bail, Forest Supervisor
National Forests in North Carolina
Nantahala-Pisgah Plan Revision
160 Zillicoa St., Suite A
Asheville, NC 28801

Dear Supervisor Bail:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the consideration of designated areas and the management of scenery for the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests' Land Management Plan. The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Council believes decisions made involving these topics will greatly affect the future of our National Forests, including the conservation of fish and wildlife. Overall, we urge the Forest Service to consider the importance of management flexibility when considering designated areas and scenery management. We believe this flexibility, given the current needs and future challenges our Forests face, will be crucial to the responsible stewardship of our National Forests.

As a reminder of what our Council is and why we were established, the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Council is a collaboration of Sportsmen's groups and individual sportsmen and women focused on issues of fish and wildlife conservation on National forests in western North Carolina. The group was formed over 20 years ago to provide a voice for wildlife and sportsmen relating to these issues, which is why we have been involved in the plan revision process to date and will continue to be involved as the process moves forward.

The topic of designations, including the Wilderness designation, is one our Council does not consider lightly. While designations are generally established with good intent, we do not believe designating areas for restrictive management is the best way to manage our Forests, especially given the uncertainty of future management needs. Designations generally place absolute limits on the management options available to the Forest Service. Limiting these options is troubling to us given the many threats our Forests, and the fish and wildlife on them, face from invasive species, insects, disease, and climate change. The idea that we can best protect or preserve an area by placing absolute restrictions on management options is antiquated and flawed. As Dr. Stephen Pyne recently opined while considering present and past land protection models, “It does little good to set lands apart for special protection if they rot away from the inside.”¹

¹ Pyne, J., Stephen. (2014, Spring). Green Fire Meets Red Fire; Environmental History Meets the No-Analogue Anthropocene. *The Pinchot Letter*, 17(3), 5-6.

In addition to limiting management options in the face of potential threats, designations can also limit management for much-needed fish and wildlife habitat on the Forests. For example, given the documented lack of early successional habitat (ESH) on Pisgah-Nantahala, the fact that additional designations could impact our ability to establish ESH is one of our great concerns. Many wildlife species requiring this type of habitat have already declined over the past 15 years due to a lack of active forestry management. What will another 15 years with additional restrictive designations mean for these species? Another example of designations potentially impacting needed wildlife habitat relates to oak regeneration. Recognizing that many species rely heavily on the mast produced by oaks, having the necessary management options available to ensure adequate oak regeneration in our Forests is essential.

Given the potential problems associated with designations, we would also like to point out that nearly 70% of our Forests already have some type of limiting designation, restriction, or prohibition against management. The biggest need for our Forests at this time is to ensure areas exist where active management can take place. We would also like to make the point that the Forest Service can always choose to not engage in certain types of active management in a non-designated area based on plan management objectives. However, changing designations when a certain type of restricted management activity is required could prove to be much more difficult.

While our Council does not support additional Wilderness or other special designations at this time, we realize the Forest Service is required to evaluate designation options as part of the planning process. In evaluating these designations, both those existing currently as well as potential ones, we request that a comprehensive impact study of the designation be completed. Each study should document the designation's impacts to fish and wildlife habitat, prescribed burning activities, and timber management, including the economic impact of removing timber from the timber base, among other items. We assert that some type of comprehensive impact study is necessary in order to carry out proper due diligence concerning a designation decision.

The fact that designations can impede active management for necessary wildlife habitat on our Forests is the same reason we are concerned with the current approach to managing scenery. While we agree that scenery management is an important part of managing our National Forests, we feel that the rigidity of the current "Scenery Management System" should be addressed with the adoption of a new, more flexible, system. Managing for scenery should be balanced with managing for other resources, such as fish and wildlife habitat, timber production, recreational opportunities, etc. Accordingly, we greatly appreciate that the Forest Service identified the need to implement a "flexible scenery management system" as a need for change. Our Council contends that a flexible system will be more compatible with certain desirable management activities, such as those required to ensure diverse wildlife habitats on our Forests, and also that this type of improved system can actually be used to enhance the overall experience of visiting the Forests. We further insist that the added benefits of a flexible scenery management system can be realized without appreciably impacting scenery.

As an example of how the new scenery management system should offer flexibility in meeting management objectives, consider the Forest Service's comment in the proposed "Need for change" document about our Forests being increasingly used by recreationists for wildlife observation.² We agree

² On the topic of wildlife observation, we believe that significantly more National Forest users appreciate viewing wildlife than identify as participating in wildlife observation. That being the case, the potential positive impact to user experiences of providing additional wildlife viewing opportunities is probably vastly underestimated at this time.

with this comment and note that active management to improve wildlife habitat can serve to meet the demands for this type of recreation. However, actively managing for wildlife habitat could lead to perceived “scenery” issues. In these cases, the new scenery management system should take into account that the impact to scenery of the active wildlife management may well be short term in nature. For instance, a prescribed burn will generally “green up” during the first spring following the burn. Short-term disturbances should not negatively impact management decisions that have longer-term benefits. Also, the new system should consider that the use of two age and shelterwood timber cuts means impacts to scenery will be less noticeable to the public than previously used “clearcutting” techniques.

The above example of wildlife observers also illustrates that viewing scenery is only one part of a visitor’s overall experience. In fact, viewing scenery is only one part of what a visitor actually views, since management for scenery relates only to landscapes and does not account for things viewed in addition to the landscape, such as fish and wildlife. For example, if there are few or no fish in a body of water, then the angler probably cares more about the lack of fish to observe and fish for than the quality of scenery around him or her. To the angler, a trout rising to take a dry fly is one of the best parts of the “scenery”!

Besides being more flexible, we would also like to see a scenery management system that evaluates scenery based more on what the majority of viewers perceive rather than the more critical eyes of landscape architects. Certainly those who are technically trained to identify disturbances and assess scenery will have a much more critical view of it than the general public; scenery decisions should be based on the value assessed by the greatest number, not on the value assessed by the more critical few. Landscape architects should certainly play an integral part in managing scenery; however, we question how noticeable certain types of disturbances are to the average viewer. And even in situations where disturbances will likely be noticed by a significant percentage of viewers, integrating an education effort can help the public understand what certain management activities were carried out to achieve. For instance, providing educational materials on the importance of maintaining diverse wildlife habitats on our Forests would make users more understanding of any noticeable scenery disturbances associated with improving wildlife habitat.

Those points about scenery management being made, you can understand why we were greatly concerned when we read over the Draft Scenery Inventory. In our view, the 6+ pages of Concern Level 1 inventory only adds to the nearly 70% of Pisgah-Nantahala that already has some type of limiting designation, restriction, or prohibition against management. As the Forest Service has already identified, a flexible scenery management system should be established that accounts for the benefits of certain active management activities promoting ecological restoration, including diversity of wildlife habitat. In considering this inventory we urge the Forest Service to utilize this more balanced approach to managing for scenery on our Forests.

In summary, the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Council does not support additional wilderness areas or other designations that limit active management for the benefit of wildlife habitat. We also call for a re-evaluation of current designations to increase management flexibility. Furthermore, we fully support a truly flexible scenery management system that does not preclude the development of important wildlife habitats. Concerning the Draft Scenery Inventory, the large areas currently proposed as Concern Level 1 and 2 are troubling to us, and we do not support these concern levels at this time. Finally, we hope that wildlife habitat and wildlife viewing can be major considerations in the new scenery management system.

Our Council appreciates the opportunity to work with the Forest Service during this important plan revision process and looks forward to continued involvement. Thank you for the work you do in managing our National Forests.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Whitmire". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Whitmire".

David Whitmire

FWCC Co- Chair

Kristin M. Bail
Supervisor, National Forest in North Carolina
160A Zillicoa Street
Asheville, NC 28801

May 15, 2014

Leonard C. Harwood
17 Dixon Ct.
Candler, NC 28715

Dear Kristin:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on scenery, and wilderness resources for the Pisgah/Nantahalla Plan Revision.

Either 1991 or 92, Steve Henson and myself were invited to sit in on a meeting with the Supervisor, the Congressman and the Superintendent of the Blue Ridge Parkway. The discussion centered around the observing of clear-cuts from the vantage point of the Parkway. In those days the cuts were numerous, mostly square, and indeed, clear-cuts. Even with this scenario, there was little objection from the public. The decision was, as I recall, we would put a Markey explaining that the cuts were temporary, and providing many benefits. We sure have come a long way haven't we.

It was about this time that Cowetta did their study, previously sent to you, showing only a small number of people had an objection. By the way, this was "real science". What is puzzling to me is, the way we form a two aged stand, or shelterwood, is nothing like what was happening back then, yet, when the bureaucrats get going with their imagination, it's like pulling hens teeth to have a cut visable from the Parkway, or trails. Where is the common sense of it all? Personally, I would like to have a field trip to the Parkway, and let the landscape architect explain the ends and outs of the beast.

Secondly, I believe it quite appropriate that the Forest Service commit to equal acreage of early succession, in relation to every additional acre set aside as no disturbance, i.e., additional wilderness, natural heritage areas, or any other designation that does not allow timbering. These number of acres would be in perpetuity but scattered throughout the forest, and even be allowed to abut up to a wilderness, old growth, or other areas. If this sounds crazy, it's not as crazy as considering additional acres in a preservation mode considering the state of forest today.

Respectfully,

Leonard C. Harwood



CHEROKEE COUNTY

75 Peachtree Street
Murphy, NC 28906
828-837-5527

Randy Wiggins, County Manager
Maria Hass, Asst. County Manager/Asst. Clerk
Candy Roberts, Finance Director
R. Scott Lindsay, County Attorney/Clerk

Board of Commissioners
David Wood, Chairman
Lorraine M. Meltz, Vice-Chair
Cal Stiles, Member
C.B. McKinnon, Member
Steve Jordan, Member

RESOLUTION OF THE CHEROKEE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

WHEREAS, the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners do hereby resolve that there exists a great threat and danger yet again to the timber resources and accessibility in the County of Graham by present attempts to create further wilderness beyond the Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock are in Graham County; and

WHEREAS, the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners are in support of Graham County's opposition of "wilderness designation areas"; and

WHEREAS, the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners also believe that further expansion of wilderness areas in Graham County will have a substantial and detrimental impact on Graham County's economy, and would create additional unemployment for a Tier 1 county, that already has the highest unemployment rate in the state: and

WHEREAS, the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners hereby express a desire to maintain and support our ever decreasing timber industry, and to retain its economical input into county revenue and school revenue streams for Graham County and Cherokee County ; and

WHEREAS, the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners would like the record to show that never once in history has wilderness been received as a tangible benefit for Cherokee County or Graham County; and,

WHEREAS, the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners believe that Graham County has sacrificed enough lands to wilderness use and believe that any further expansion of the wilderness program on forest lands would further reduce employment, income, and school financial support.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners stand with Graham County in opposition to the designation of any further wilderness areas in Graham County, and any future potential for designation in Cherokee County forest lands.



05/14/14

**RE: Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) Comments on Designations and Scenery Workshops
04/17/14 Forest Plan Revision**

The RGS is appreciative of the opportunity to comment on the proposed change in wilderness, designated areas and scenery classifications within the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests.

Current wilderness areas (70,000 acres), wilderness study areas (27,000 acres) and 33 IRAs total nearly 250,000 acres or 25% of the our National Forest Lands under the present Plan designations. Therefore RGS is vehemently opposed to additional wilderness areas at this time. There also exists by USFS estimate approximately 40% old growth designation, an additional 68,000 acres, non-inclusive in the above tally bringing the underlying total to 317,000 acres (approximately 1/3 of the forest) that can be considered wilderness in terms of management designation. This new area of restricted 'hands off' management does not include those areas determined unsuitable for timber harvest or prohibited for other reasons such as in-operable site conditions retarding timber management activities and thereby the assumption of passive wildlife management.

The proximity of the Nantahala and Pisgah to the Great Smoky Mountain National Park ecologically functions as wilderness under passive management by the National Parks system. Therefore adding another half million acres of wilderness designation to the region by default. Wildlife recognizes no jurisdictional boundaries and therefore the management needs of wildlife and the continuation of vegetative diversity on a regional aspect to also benefit wildlife diversity should exceed the scope of National Forest boundaries. How that is accomplished is in recognizing the need on the Nantahala and Pisgah in ensuring that areas will continue to remain and the plausible addition of other areas for active management where perpetuating the growth of native flora and fauna populations, providing a steady flow of wood products, and maintaining a healthy forest are the priorities of management efforts rather than the recreational desires of some user groups which can amicably be met in the unmanaged National Parks System.

Comments regarding the inventory process:

Anthropogenic influence is present throughout these National Forest Lands. Some areas maybe more prevalent than others or require the assistance of a trained eye, but settlements, timber activity, farming, wildfires, roads, and trails in the form of clues from vegetative footprints walk you through the





past centuries not decades. All areas have been impacted. There should be no portion of the analysis for wilderness nomination left to subjectivity by personal opinion. Consideration of the nomination for designation of wilderness carries the same responsibility of assurance for the condition and health of the stand in perpetuity for future generations a silviculturist has when he/she writes a prescription. With the onslaught of insect, disease, invasive and non-native species in the forest of today this type of assurance is no longer available. Every stand under the jurisdiction of the USFS should have the flexibility for management entry to assist in ensuring the health and quality of its natural integrity and continued human interaction in the new Plan.

The impending question in the inventory process is in the missing element of identifying if the area functions as a unique ecologic system for a species or as a missing part of an unbalanced system. If the area will NOT contribute to the diversity of the region it therefore can be concluded that removing it from the potential base of active forest management acreage (where it will contribute to the biodiversity of the region) would potentially result in harm to wildlife populations through no management. This portion of the process needs to be based on supporting scientific documentation not subjective reasoning. To this point it seems wildlife has not been considered a priority in the planning process.

The evaluation process should provide detailed information from growth and yield projection tables on any timber acres that would be removed from the suitable timber base classification. The amount of area affected should be correlated to the number of jobs in the associated industry and resulting potential economic impact on surrounding counties.

Designated Areas:

The RGS opposes the addition of any designated areas and proposes the review of current areas for their contribution to the landscape, culture preservation, history, education, or unique / critical habitat (characteristic list may be incomplete). Areas that meet the mentioned criteria should be addressed in the newly established Plan directives, standards and guidelines for adherence verses the discretion of the presiding forest supervisor. Designations should not replace responsible management as is the design of a Forest Management Plan.

Prior to designating any area the previous land use history of the affected area should be evaluated for both human activities and resource usage. Examples of this would include but be limited to exclusion from suitable for timber harvest acreage and certain restrictions placed on trails.



Linda D. Ordiway PhD.
Regional Biologist
Mid-Atlantic Southern Appalachian



412-720-6034
LindaO@ruffedgrousesociety.org

Designations should maintain the flexibility in management of the resource they were designated to protect. Degradation of high focal areas frequently occurs in 'special' areas. Designations should not equate to hands off management.

Scenery

The RGS is opposed to all concern level 1 and level 2 classifications at this time. With the information provided and the amount of maps with an exhaustive amount of roads and waterways identified for scenic views it is our concern this will severely retard the ability of the USFS personnel to properly manage the lands they are charged with. Once again what is the priority of this newly developing Plan? A large part of this charge needs to be public education in forest ecology and the aesthetics surrounding disturbance as scenery. Does the USFS receive opposition for cutting timber to clear the pullouts to maintain the overlooks of the now classified concern level 1 travelways? Perhaps they should remain in the natural state.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments. The RGS will continue to work cooperatively with the USFS in the planning process and will participate actively in the next phase.

Professionally

RUFFED GROUSE  SOCIETY
Healthy Forests - Abundant Wildlife - Sporting Traditions

451 McCORMICK ROAD • CORAOPOLIS, PENNSYLVANIA 15108-9377
(412) 262-4044 FAX (412) 262-9207 (888) 564-6747 TOLL FREE
Email: rgs@ruffedgrousesociety.org www.ruffedgrousesociety.org

Nantahala & Pisgah National Forests Plan Revision
Initial Scenery Inventory Constituent Input

Email completed form to ncplanrevision@fs.fed.us

<p>District Name: _____</p> <p>Quad Name: _____</p> <p>Travelway/Use Area/Water Body Name: _____</p> <p>Suggested Concern Level (check one)</p> <p>CL1 CL2 None (CL3)</p>	<p>District Name: _____</p> <p>Quad Name: _____</p> <p>Travelway/Use Area/Water Body Name: _____</p> <p>Suggested Concern Level (check one)</p> <p>CL1 CL2 None (CL3)</p>
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Nantahala & Pisgah National Forests Plan Revision

Initial Scenery Inventory Constituent Input

Email completed form to ncplanrevision@fs.fed.us

<p>District Name: _____</p> <p>Quad Name: _____</p> <p>Travelway/Use Area/Water Body Name: _____</p> <p>Suggested Concern Level (check one)</p> <p>CL1 CL2 None (CL3)</p>	<p>District Name: _____</p> <p>Quad Name: _____</p> <p>Travelway/Use Area/Water Body Name: _____</p> <p>Suggested Concern Level (check one)</p> <p>CL1 CL2 None (CL3)</p>
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SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN BRANCH of the QUALITY DEER MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 160 • 170 Whitetail Way • Bogart, GA 30622

PHONE: 828.337.5552 • www.QDMA.com

Date: May 15, 2014
To: Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests, Supervisor's Office
From: Tyler Ross, President
422 Day Lily Dr.
Leicester, NC 28748

Re: Plan Revision #43545

I am writing on behalf of the Southern Appalachian Branch of the Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA) to provide input on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests Plan Revision #43545. The Southern Appalachian Branch is based on Leicester, NC as a local branch of the QDMA, a national nonprofit wildlife conservation organization dedicated to ensuring the future of white-tailed deer, wildlife habitat and our hunting heritage. Our Branch is not restricted to one area or one county within WNC, in fact we have members from McDowell County all the way to the Tennessee line.

The Southern Appalachian Branch of the QDMA stands with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission and the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Councils comments on the Scenery Management. We feel that the forest land that the people own and you manage should be utilized for timber production and wildlife habitat. Any further designations on our lands will further the degradation of habitat that is the Nantahala Pisgah National Forests. With almost 250,000 acres in some form of designation (i.e. Roadless, Wilderness, Wilderness Study) and another 68,000 with old growth designation (based off USFS estimate) that brings in 317,000 acres where wildlife and timber harvest are suffering. With the additional fragmentation that is the NPS Great Smoky Mountains National Park (500,000 acres) there is enough scenery areas in our forest. Timber harvest and wildlife habitat is what we urge the USFS to strive for. This can only be achieved with no more designations.

Regards,

Tyler Ross
President, Southern Appalachian Branch of the QDMA

Leicester, NC



⊠ North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission ⊠

Gordon Myers, Executive Director

May 14th, 2014

Ms. Kristin Bail
Forest Supervisor, National Forests in North Carolina
U.S. Forest Service
160 Zillicoa Rd., Suite A
Asheville, North Carolina 28801

SUBJECT: NCWRC Comments NCWRC Comments on USFS Designations and Scenery Workshops held April 17, 2014, Asheville, NC

Dear Ms. Bail:

Staff of the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission attended the USFS' *Designations and Scenery Workshops* held April 17th, 2014 in Asheville, NC. Comments from the NCWRC are offered for your consideration under Clean Water Act of 1977 (33 U.S.C. 466 et. seq.) and Wildlife Coordination Act (48 Stat. 401, as amended; 16 U.S.C. 661-667d).

NCWRC is opposed to additional wilderness areas at this time. In addition to the designated wilderness areas (70,000 acres) and wilderness study areas (27,000 acres), there are 33 Inventoried Roadless Areas (152,000 acres) for a total of nearly 250,000 acres or 25% of the National Forest Lands. If one adds in 40% (USFS estimate) of the old growth designation that does not overlap with the above (68,000 acres), the total is 317,000 acres or almost one third of the forest that is essentially wilderness. This does not include areas where timber harvest is restricted or prohibited for other reasons (e.g. inoperable) which can amount to another third of the forest where responsible and scientific management cannot occur. Using an "all lands" approach, the Great Smoky Mountain National Park adds another half million acres of essentially wilderness designation. The current need on the National Forests in western North Carolina is not for more designated wilderness or any other designation that limits active management for restoration of our forests or for the creation of critical wildlife habitats. The biggest need is to ensure that areas still exist where management can occur and not to place any further restrictions on these areas.

We offer the following input regarding the inventory of wilderness areas process, however:

Step 4

- 1) To assess the degree or level of impacts by man, the USFS needs to consider a time frame longer than the past 20 years. There are many signs of the impacts of man in our forests, especially dating back to the large cutting events of the early 1900's. Those events along with massive wildfires, subsequent logging including high-grading, grazing, soil loss, unauthorized roads/trails, invasive species, and other activities over the last 100-200 years have left permanent signs of the evidence of man. The resulting vegetative composition and structure are clear signs of areas trampled by man. Evidence of settlements and home sites and the surrounding areas they impacted are quite abundant. It will be exceedingly difficult to find anywhere on the National

Mailing Address: Division of Inland Fisheries • 1721 Mail Service Center • Raleigh, NC 27699-1721
Telephone: (919) 707-0220 • **Fax:** (919) 707-0028

Forests that does not show evidence of where man has trammeled. Even the current wilderness areas show such evidence. Hence, the determination of “degree of being trammeled” will be subjective and we believe there are no such areas. There is no reason to limit the analysis to impacts from the last 20 years.

- 2) Before putting any area into wilderness, the USFS should ensure beyond all reasonable doubt that the community types present do not need or will never need any active restoration. It should be absolutely certain that if an area is left alone for 200 years, that the system will undoubtedly have the ability to “heal” itself and not follow an unintended trajectory both on a compositional and structural basis. We challenge USFS to find any area that would meet these criteria.
- 3) The economic impacts of removing any area from the suitable timber base should be weighed including the impacts to counties dependent on payments for schools.
- 4) The impacts to wildlife should be considered. If a candidate for wilderness area will not be able to sustain a full diversity of species, or in some way provide a missing element in the diversity picture, then it should not be included. Given the large proportion of the forest where active forest management is either prohibited or restricted (noted above), wilderness is not going to add to the diversity picture.
- 5) The importance of fire to the proposed wilderness area should be assessed. A wilderness area designation severely limits the ability to conduct large prescribed burns and in some instances could hinder existing prescribed burns from being implemented (we can provide examples of this). This has had a negative impact on the very systems these designations are intended to “save”. With the highly altered landscapes we have inherited, managers (our two agencies) depend on man-created prescribed fire to sustain and restore fire-adapted ecosystems.

DESIGNATION SESSION: We offer the following input based on the afternoon designation session.
Is there some criteria for evaluating special designated areas that we have missed or that you would modify?

- 1) Special areas were methodically identified in the previous plan. No new areas have developed or have been created since that time. We oppose the addition of any more special designations.
- 2) ***The protection of various special areas, communities, and values should more appropriately be covered by plan direction, standards and guidelines, not through the creation of additional designated areas.*** Designations were not intended to take the place of a sound management plan.
- 3) Current designations should not interfere with the suitable timber base
- 4) Current designations should not lead to the degradation of other resources (e.g. a recreation area leads to high traffic and then streams become silted).
- 5) Current designations should not limit any management that is needed to maintain the very resources they were intended to protect OR other resources that need active management to maintain their integrity (e.g. wildlife habitat needed in an area and would need to create an opening, development of firebreak to implement a prescribed burn). In other words, re-examine current designations to ensure flexibility for management (noted below also).

What isand existing designated area that forests should modify in the revised plan, and WHY?

- 1) Need to re-evaluate old growth. Many of these areas are on sites that had much more disturbance than they are currently being subject to currently. Also, open canopy old growth is clearly an important restoration objective as much of these areas are in a closed canopy condition. ***It should be the clear mission and the number one priority of old growth designations to increase the amount of open old growth conditions via thinning and other silvicultural methods.*** This should be done before continuing to designate more old growth. In addition, the amount of area that is unsuitable or restricted for other reasons should be a factor in future designations of old growth. If a lot of the area is going to be “defacto” old growth then consider not adding more.

Also consider the operability of an area for early successional habitat; i.e. if few operable areas are present, then priority should be given to young forest habitats.

- 2) Significant natural heritage areas should not be designated administratively as the USFS already has a flexible and solid process to account for the protection of rare element occurrences. It should be clearly stated in the plan that although the USFS can consider these areas, they will not impede the use of any management practice the USFS considers necessary for the conservation of the National Forests.
- 3) Interior bird patches are being used in some Ranger Districts, and are being used based on old information. In many instances, these designations are actually impeding management that can help some of these bird species. Interior birds, like all other wildlife, should be considered on a site specific basis based on the habitat in an area and the presence of species in the area or should be covered in plan direction and management area descriptions. These designations are unnecessary and should be removed to retain management flexibility to address potential future changes in habitat and species needs.
- 4) Review every designation and ensure that management for the restoration of communities or wildlife is allowable and not unnecessarily restricted. Designations are often used to prevent these much needed activities and can hinder a manager's ability to adequately address future needs and changes.

Scenery

Initially we were quite hopeful that the new scenery system would be flexible and account for the needs of wildlife and ecological restoration. During the open session on scenery, we saw maps with extensive roads and waterways identified for consideration as concern levels 1 and 2. Without knowing the specifics of the proposed new scenery system we are very concerned that if this proposal goes forward, large areas where management could occur may be restricted unnecessarily. We need more information on the implications of concern level 1 and 2 and how that might impact needed management.

Given this situation, NCWRC would suggest re-designating all primary travel ways and waterways identified as concern level 1 to concern level 3. And we suggest re-designating all the secondary roads, trails and waterways that were listed as concern level 2, to concern level 3 also. Again, we would like more information on the new scenery system.

One big concern is that Fontana and Santeetlah lakes would remove an enormous area from much needed management for wildlife. There are already projects ready to go in these areas. There are many more examples too numerous to list.

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this preliminary plan. Please contact me at (828) 659-8684 ext. 221 if you have any questions about these comments or need further assistance.

Sincerely,



Doug Besler, Mountain Region Fishery Supervisor
North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

May 15, 2014

Dear Supervisor Bail:

I do not support new wilderness areas on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. Given the existing 6 Wilderness Areas, 5 Wilderness Study Areas and 33 Inventoried Roadless Areas, I do not believe there is a need for additional acreage to be permanently restricted. All management options should be left on the table.

I do not support new designated areas.

I vote Concern Level 3 for all roadways, trails and waterways in every district.

I submit the following comments on specific areas proposed for wilderness:

(1) Middle Prong Extension: (a) The Wayne E. Smith shooting range on the adjacent Cold Mountain Game Lands undermines the notion that this area would provide “outstanding opportunities for solitude.” Along the course of Lickstone Ridge, there are few places where gunshots cannot be heard loudly almost all day Monday through Saturday. It’s a very popular range, and the range can be clearly heard all the way to the top of the ridge even in the summer time; (b) The Big Creek and McClure Creek watersheds have substantially noticeable vegetation management histories – readily apparent timber harvests; (c) the road to Double Spring Gap; (d) the area is roaded heavily throughout with roads reaching the higher elevations; and (e) the bald at Double Spring Gap (requires forest management to keep in open condition) should have been an excluding factor.

(2) Shining Rock Wilderness Extension: This is not an appropriate area for wilderness designation given the extremely high use and high visibility of Road 816. This road spur stretches the spirit of the Wilderness Act.

(3) South Mills River: (a) The South Mills River trails that runs south towards Otter Hole from FS Road 5018 and beyond it is a road that is used as a trail. The bridge on this section is large and on old topos the trail is shown as “South Mills River Road”; (b) Substantially noticeable vegetation management history – roads and timber harvests are apparent on the east side of the river from Funneltop Mountain south to headwaters of Laurel Brook; (c) timber harvests in upper Cantrell Creek watershed; (d) two big wildlife fields north of the river and south of Big Pine Ridge; (e) old timber harvest with roads on east side of Big Pine Ridge; (f) heavy network of roads in Poundingmill Branch drainage; and (g) wildlife opening at intersection of Big Bradley Creek and Pea Branch Creek.

(4) Laurel Mountain: (a) Multiple highly visible timber harvests along south aspect of Big Ridge and one on north side of Beetree Ridge in Horse Cove; (b) big timber harvest area (and

road to it) immediately due east of Pilot Rock in upper Pilot Cove; (c) FS Road 5097 runs through Big Ridge; and (d) timber harvests south of Pilot Rock.

(5) Cedar Rock: (a) Heavily roaded area; (b) FS Road 5095; (c) FS Road 475C very prominent; (d) Picklesimer Fields; (e) old field at headwaters of Searcy Creek; and (f) three timber harvests in Horse Cove on backside of John Rock.

(6) Bald Mountain: (a) timber harvests west of Hickey's Fork Road; (b) Pounding Mill loop road; (c) White Oaks Flats wildlife fields; and (d) timber harvests and road network in White Oak Flats vicinity.

(7) Pigeon River Gorge: (a) The configuration of this proposed area stretches the concept of wilderness as many portions are narrow and the entire proposal resembles a badly gerrymandered district; (b) adjacency to I-40 does not lend itself to a wilderness experience; (c) the boundary did not account for the southernmost timber harvests on the side of Harmon Den Mountain; (f) timber harvest on tributary to Groundhog Creek; and (g) multiple roads west and southwest of Pounding Mill Branch and Cold Springs Creek confluence.

Sincerely,

John Culclasure
North Carolina Lifetime Sportsman
185 Pigeon Street
Waynesville, NC 28786