

USFS says Southside Project is finalized

Chattooga Conservancy says fight is not over

Last week the U.S. Forest Service completed its environmental analysis for the Southside project which it believes will improve forest health, diversity, and wildlife habitat in southeastern Macon County and southern Jackson County.

As far as the USFS is concerned, this ends a close to four-year process involving the community which resulted in the tweaking of plans for the project that straddles Macon and Jackson counties east of Highlands.

According to the USFS, the purpose of the Southside Project, which involves 29,090 acres, is to thin old growth areas to spur new growth which will make the forest more resilient and sustainable and will improve breeding and foraging habitat for wildlife. Thinning will ultimately increase young forest habitat in the 0-10 year-age class that now makes up only 1% of the project area.

“I thank the public for participating in the process. I am disappointed we could not make everyone happy but we tried to strike a balance, so we have a forest that is resilient and sustainable for all the public’s plants and animals,” said Nantahala District Ranger Mike Wilkins.

Changes to the proposed project were based on public engagement and interagency coordination over a 4-year period.

According to Wilkins, those interactions began in 2015-'16 when an informal dialogue began with a couple of the environmental groups, wildlife groups and the game commission. At that time, people were invited to provide input to the USFS’s prescription for the Southside Project area

Following that, an official public input period began in February of 2017.

Wilkins said members of the USFS then met with the Chattooga Conservancy – the watchdog of such matters – March of 2017.

The Chattooga Conservancy’s mission is to protect, promote and restore the natural ecological integrity of the Chattooga River watershed ecosystems; to ensure the viability of native species in harmony with the need for a healthy human environment; and to educate and empower communities to practice good stewardship on public and private lands.

Then a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) was released to the public and in February 2018 public comment was solicited.

Based on input from the public and environmental groups, Wilkins released a draft Decisional EA and Draft Decision on July 11, 2018.

Following that, the Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Supervisor Allen Nicholas had an objection resolution meeting Nov. 1, 2018 at his office in Asheville where protestors gathered to voice objections.

According to the final decision notice released last week, over the course of deliberations, 30 objections to the proposed project were collected with the majority of the concerns being about old growth and the protection of salamander populations.

“As a result of this review, I am updating the plan to clarify and enhance the design criteria,” wrote Wilkins.

Changes to the proposed project based on public engagement and interagency coordination include dropping two stands – 29 acres – from the initial proposal, including additional buffers around documented locations of green salamanders, and very carefully conducting thinning and burning treatments to improve species composition in the Whitewater River Falls and Gorge Natural Heritage Natural Area.

In addition, 37 percent (6,944 acres) of the project area is designated to preserve and produce old growth conditions and will continue to be managed as such into the future.

But Nicole Hayler, Executive Director of the Chattooga Conservancy, which spearheaded opposition to the Southside Project said the Chattooga Conservancy vehemently disagrees with the Forest Service’s decision, and intends to keep fighting to protect one of the last, most biologically rich and wild places in the Southeastern U.S.

“Only one-half of 1% of old growth forests remains in the Southeast, and these rare stands of trees on public lands should be preserved — not liquidated,” reads her press release.

“The Southside Project approves: 1) Cutting irreplaceable old growth forests; 2) Destroying essential habitat for imperiled Green Salamanders; 3) Burning over 2,000 acres repeatedly, drastically exceeding natural fire cycles; 3) Widespread, frequent herbicide applications to kill native forest species in favor of “crop trees;” and, 4) Net loss of taxpayers’ money.”

However, Wilkins says the Forest Service is committed to following an old growth strategy and carefully considers forest age classes before embarking on projects like the Southside Project.

About 33 percent of national forest in the project area is over 100 years old. Across the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests, the trend towards older trees is increasing such that in 50 years nearly half of the forest will be comprised of trees older than 130 years. Only about 1 percent of the project area is young forest, defined as trees up to 10 years old.

“In the management of national forests there are trade-offs. We make decisions based on the best available science that lead us to cut some trees to make room for others,” said Wilkins. “Forests need diversity and all ages of trees. What’s missing from the Southside area is young forest.”

Removing patches of older trees gives young trees access to sunlight and water allowing them to sprout and grow. Small and medium sized forest openings provide fruit and nutritious foliage and flowers that attract pollinators and other insects and support populations of small mammals that, in turn, are prey for larger animals. Openings can be created by natural processes such as storms or intense wildfires, but in their absence need to be created through active management.

The Southside project will create 317 acres of young forest in 23 separate stands across the 19,000 acres of the project area. Over one-third of the openings will be one acre or less. The project will also rehabilitate existing wildlife openings; establish native nectar and pollen producing species in wildlife openings, log landings, and roadsides to benefit native pollinators; and improve fisheries habitat in Scotsman Creek.

The irony is that Chattooga Conservancy agrees with Forest Service managers about needing some prescribed burning and cultivating younger forests, but Hayler says it strongly opposes the way the USFS wants to achieve these mutual goals and the science it is using to justify the proposed practices.

Buzz Williams, former Chattooga Conservancy Executive Director and past Forest Service employee, who holds a degree in Forest Management from Clemson University said there are hundreds of places to create young forests on the landscape — without cutting old growth trees and destroying critical habitats — while still conducting prescribed burning within reason.

The Chattooga Conservancy believes the Southside Project should be shelved and redesigned, until after the new Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Plan is in place.

Williams said the public has rallied for the fight to protect the area’s native forests and people can count on the Chattooga Conservancy to enter the next phase of opposition.

According to Wilkins, work in the project area is expected to begin next year though timber management activities will not likely occur until 2021.

Commercial timber harvesting and silvicultural treatments will be used to thin old growth areas while controlling woolly vines to release oaks and hickories to ensure acorn and nut production in the regenerating stands, control non-native invasive species, prolong grass and brushy habitat on temporary roads and skid trails for wildlife benefits and to rehabilitate wildlife openings.

Pictured at the top of the article are people gathered at the “protest rally Nov. 1, 2018 at the Forest Supervisor office in Asheville. Pictured in the middle are from left Buzz Williams, Chattooga Conservancy; Allen Nicholas, Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Supervisor; and Mike Wilkins, Nantahala Ranger District.

– Kim Lewicki, Highlands Newspaper