



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Blue Ridge Ranger District
2042 Hwy 515 W
Blairsville, GA 30512

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File Code: 1950

Date: December 18, 2015

Opportunity to Comment
Cooper Creek Watershed Project
Blue Ridge Ranger District
Union County, Georgia

Dear Forest Stakeholder:

We would like your comments on the draft environmental assessment for the Cooper Creek Watershed project (CCWP) located in Union County, south of Blairsville on the Blue Ridge Ranger District.

For more than five years, analysis has been conducted in the watershed to determine its condition and health. Historically, frequent fire actively influenced the forest resulting in areas of open, park-like stands dominated by young oaks and woodlands. Currently, six of seven ecosystems within the 29,600 acre project area are more than 50 percent departed from historic forest conditions. Less than one percent of the project area has the young forest essential for songbirds, deer, wild turkey and ruffed grouse. Approximately 88 percent of the project area has canopy so dense, little to no light reaches the forest floor limiting hardwood tree diversity and wildlife habitat. In other words, the forest is currently out of balance and unhealthy.

The primary focus of the CCWP is to return the area to a healthy and sustainable condition by reestablishing forest pattern and structure, improving wildlife habitat and increasing watershed function. Numerous public scoping comments, site visits and additional analysis were reviewed and incorporated into the proposal including activities to: (1) restore native plant communities, (2) enhance wildlife habitat conditions, and (3) improve forest health.

Key modified proposed action information:

- Prescribed fire is planned on an average of 2-4 thousand acres every year over ten years to help restore historic conditions and oak stands in the forest.
- More than 1,834 acres would be allocated as old-growth forest with an average stand age of 120 years old. This incorporates public desire to conserve old growth.
- There is no 'clear cutting' whatsoever and more than 90 percent of the project area would see no thinning at all.
- Approximately six percent (1,679 acres) of the project area would be improved through commercial thinning with an average of 20-60 trees per acre remaining.
- Three percent (912 acres) would be improved through noncommercial thinning with an average of 20-60 trees per acre remaining.
- Young, open forest would be established across the project area to create essential habitat for songbirds, ruffed grouse, wild turkey, and other wildlife.

The proposed project is an activity implementing a land management plan and is subject to the pre-decisional objection process at 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B.



The draft EA and supporting documents are available at the project-specific link on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests website at: go.usa.gov/3JQs3

These documents are also available for review at the Blue Ridge Ranger District office at 2042 Highway 515 West, Blairsville, GA 30512. Additional information regarding this project can be obtained at this office by contacting Jim Wentworth by phone at 706-745-6928 ext 107.

HOW TO COMMENT

The opportunity to comment ends 30 days following the publication of the legal notice in the North Georgia News (Blairsville, Georgia) and News Observer (Blue Ridge, Georgia), whichever is later. **We expect this notice to be published on Wednesday, January 6, 2016.** Only those who submit timely and specific written comments as defined by §218.2 regarding the proposed project or activity during a public comment period established by the responsible official are eligible to file an objection under §218.24(b)(6). For issues to be raised in objections, they must be based on previously submitted written comments regarding the proposed project or activity and attributed to the objector. The publication date of the legal notice in the newspapers of record are the exclusive means for calculating the time to submit written comments on a proposed project or activity. The time period for the opportunity to comment on a proposed project or activity to be documented with an environmental assessment shall not be extended. It is the responsibility of all individuals and organizations to ensure that their comments are received in a timely manner. Only those who respond to this request for comments will remain on the mailing list for this project.

Specific written comments must be submitted to: Andrew L. Baker, District Ranger, 2042 Highway 515 West, Blairsville, GA 30512, fax (706-745-7494), office (706-745-6928). The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 11:30 am and 12:30 pm to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx) to comments-blueridge@fs.fed.us. Comments may also be made directly on the Cooper Creek Watershed Project webpage at go.usa.gov/3JQs3 by selecting the “Comment on Project” link on the right-hand side of the page. For objection eligibility, each individual or representative from each entity submitting timely and specific written comments regarding the proposed project or activity must either sign the comments or verify identity up request (§218.24(b)(8)).

Please state “Cooper Creek Watershed Project” in the subject line when providing electronic comments, or on the envelope when replying by mail.

Sincerely,

/s/ Andrew L. Baker

ANDREW L. BAKER
District Ranger