



Date: June 28, 2024

Dear Interested Parties:

The Southern Region of the Forest Service has been grouped into strategic and focused work areas called subregions. The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest, the National Forests in North Carolina (includes the Nantahala, Pisgah, Croatan, and Uwharrie), the Cherokee National Forest and the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests comprise the Southern Appalachian Subregion (Subregion). Together, the Subregion occupies roughly 4.5 million acres of National Forest Systems lands in Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia. The Subregion is seeking public input on the following proposal spanning the above-mentioned Forests.

Project Purpose and Proposal

The Subregion strives to increase the pace and scale of watershed resiliency projects to prepare Forest Service infrastructure and decrease risk from predicted climate change threats of increased storm magnitude and frequency. Improving watershed resiliency decreases potential climate change impacts to ecological, aquatic, recreational, and community resources and services. It simultaneously benefits watershed condition, water quality, and aquatic habitat connectivity.

The Subregion is a critical landscape for proactive and strategic climate adaptation planning. Subregional watersheds are ecologically diverse and significant (brook trout occur in 124 watersheds and 120 watersheds have aquatic federally threatened, endangered and sensitive species), are home to numerous important National Park Service assets (e.g., the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Appalachian National Scenic Trail), are economically connected to many communities that rely on Forest recreators, and provide source water for millions of people in nearby urban centers. The Subregion has countless critical utilities, telecommunications facilities, and critical transportation infrastructure that provide access to and through the National Forests, which may be at an increased risk of damage by elevated climate-related impacts. Recent studies by the National Stream and Aquatic Ecology center identified portions of the Subregion as containing watersheds with higher flood potential than many other parts of the country. Similarly, various areas across the Subregion have a high or very high risk of landslides and mass wasting. The need for action is further supported by a compilation of technical findings by the Southern Appalachian Aquatic Technical Advisory Board (comprised primarily of academic, Federal agencies, State agencies and Tribal representatives) that outlines the need for proactive watershed restoration action within this landscape and a record of peer reviewed literature supporting various restoration actions. These findings will be considered during the development of this project additionally with input from all stakeholders during this scoping and additional future comment periods. This report can be located at the project pages listed below.

The Subregion is beginning an analysis that will outline various watershed restoration and resiliency practices. Potential resiliency practices under consideration for inclusion include replacing culverts or bridges with ecologically functional crossings, culvert or bridge betterments, dam or obstruction removals, streambank restoration and habitat improvement, large wood debris augmentation, road and trail relocation, rare species habitat augmentation, water quality improvement projects, and/or



non-native species treatment. These kinds of practices are routinely implemented by the Forest Service and supported by the best available science to meet watershed resiliency resource objectives. Some of these singular actions are currently implemented under existing Forest Service Categorical Exclusions. The proposed approach to analyze these projects across an ecologically important landscape creates an opportunity to be responsive to ecological threats and impacts and provides an opportunity for partner involvement at a landscape scale. We anticipate the analysis for this project to occur within an Environmental Assessment (EA).

This analysis would provide a framework so that subsequent site-specific projects could be implemented expeditiously. Because the location and timing of resiliency projects are dependent upon factors such as storm impacts and cross-boundary partnership opportunities, the EA would not propose site-specific projects. Instead, it would provide a flexible toolbox approach that allows predetermined resiliency projects (such as those listed above) to align with current conditions on the ground.

The Forest Service would consult under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act and Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. Recognizing that each Forest has different consultation frameworks that may address resiliency practices considered in the EA, the Proposed Action and consultation process may vary for each Forest.

The EA would likely include considerations for issues including but not limited to aquatic ecology, special status species, non-native invasive species, botany, silviculture, soils, geology, hydrology, visual resources, recreation, special area designations, roads and transportation, cultural resources, climate change, and economics.

Decision to be Made and Consideration of Effects Analysis

The EA would inform Decision Notices signed by each respective Forest Supervisor. This approach provides flexibility to incorporate Forest-specific considerations such as design features, consultations, and specific watershed resiliency practices into each Forest's decision, reflecting the unique resources, processes, and considerations in each Forest.

The Decision Notices would allow for direct implementation of a site-specific project without the need for additional NEPA documentation. To ensure a site-specific project is compliant with the EA analysis and applicable Decision Notice, an implementation checklist process would be required to ensure compliance with all laws, project design criteria, and any ground clearances as applicable. Public involvement is crucial, and this project seeks to determine ways to engage the public now and through implementation.

While comprehensive information about the conditions found across every acre in the Subregion is incomplete, sufficient data is available about what treatments work for certain conditions and what protections need to be in place to prevent significant impacts to resources. As such, project-specific design criteria would be the basis for consistent implementation and effects analysis. Site-specific watershed resiliency practices would be implemented using project-specific design criteria and a



consistent method to design, implement, monitor, and document project implementation and effectiveness.

Public Involvement

The Subregion is seeking public involvement and comments on this proposal starting **July 1, 2024** concluding on **July 31, 2024**.

This proposal would implement the Forest Plans, as amended, for each of the involved Forests and is subject to the objection process pursuant to 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B. Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days of the date of this letter.

Only those who submit timely and specific written comments per 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) §218.2 regarding the proposed project or activity during a public comment period established by the responsible official are eligible to file an objection (36 CFR §218.24(b) (6)). In order to raise issues during the objections period, they must be based on previously submitted, specific written comments regarding the proposed project or activity and attributed to the objector. All individuals and organizations are responsible for ensuring that their comments are received in a timely manner.

Comments received, including commenter names and addresses, are considered part of the public record for this proposed action and would be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously are accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments do not afford the agency the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

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 upon request 36 CFR §218.24(b)(8).

Comments may be submitted electronically at:

<https://cara.fs2c.usda.gov/Public/CommentInput?project=66474>. Electronic comments may be submitted as Microsoft Word documents (.doc or .docx), portable document files (.pdf), or in rich text format (.rtf), text (.txt), or hypertext markup language (.html).

Comments may also be mailed to the following address. Please state “Southern Appalachian Watershed Resiliency Project” on the envelope when replying by mail.

Jessie Howard – Project Coordinator
5162 Valleypointe Parkway
Roanoke, VA 24019

Additional project information can be accessed at each of the Forests’ project webpages. Project information across the various pages will be similar, except when it comes to documents specific to the Forest such as a future legal notice for a respective newspaper of record (for example).

Chattahoochee - Oconee National Forest - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=66472>



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Southern
Appalachian
Subregion

Chattahoochee – Oconee National Forest
Cherokee National Forest
George Washington and Jefferson National Forests
National Forests in North Carolina

Cherokee National Forest - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=66473>

George Washington and Jefferson National Forests -
<https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=66474>

National Forests in North Carolina - <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=66471>

The scoping comment period is one of multiple opportunities for the public to review project materials, engage in working groups and provide input. The Forest Supervisors for the Chattahoochee – Oconee, National Forests in North Carolina, Cherokee National Forest and the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests will use your comments to assist with informing this process and forming these decisions. We value your involvement and input.

During the scoping period, we extend an invitation to join us at a **virtual public meeting on JULY 17, 2024 from 3:00 – 4:00 PM EST**. Comments conveyed at this meeting will not be collected as official project comments.

Microsoft Teams Link for Virtual Meeting

https://teams.microsoft.com/l/meetup-join/19%3ameeting_NTU5NDJiZjQtNDljYi00ZmE2LTlkMjgtNmI0YjlkYzkyYjgw%40thread.v2/0?context=%7b%22Tid%22%3a%22ed5b36e7-01ee-4ebc-867e-e03cfa0d4697%22%2c%22Oid%22%3a%22e9981208-d110-4a02-a83d-b0ce76f47303%22%7d

Meeting ID: 241 608 747 843 Passcode: hFbnoN

Dial in by phone

[+1 202-650-0123](tel:+12026500123).,119284503# Phone conference ID: 119 284 503#

If you have any questions about this proposal, please contact Jessie Howard at (540) 492 -1728 or Jessie.Howard@usda.gov. Thank you for your interest in the management of your National Forests.

Sincerely,

James Melonas,
Forest Supervisor, National Forests in North Carolina

Joby P. Timm
Forest Supervisor, George Washington and Jefferson National Forests



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Southern
Appalachian
Subregion

Chattahoochee – Oconee National Forest
Cherokee National Forest
George Washington and Jefferson National Forests
National Forests in North Carolina

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Judy Toppins".

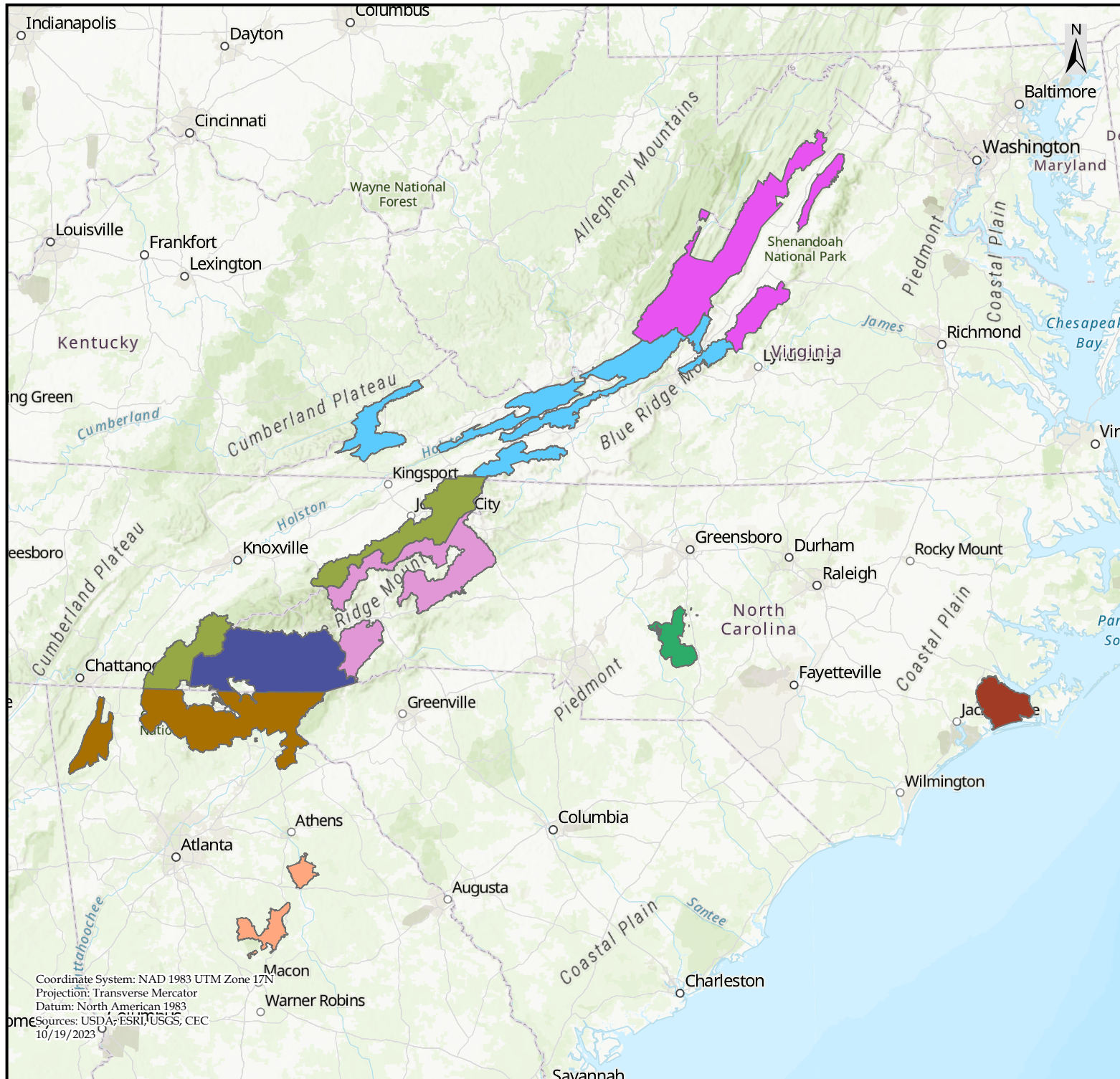
Judy Toppins,
Forest Supervisor, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Michael Wright".

Michael Wright
Forest Supervisor, Cherokee National Forest

Enclosed: Southern Appalachian Subregion Map

cc: Cavan Fitzsimmons, Deputy Forest Supervisor, National Forests in North Carolina
Linwood Butler, Deputy Forest Supervisor, George Washington and Jefferson National
Forests
Stephanie Bland, Deputy Forest Supervisor, Cherokee National Forest
Jessie Howard, Southern Appalachian Project Coordinator



COPPERHEAD
ENVIRONMENTAL CONSULTING

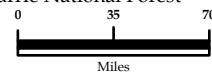
Prepared for:

USFS

National Forest Locations for the
Watershed Environmental Assessment.

Legend

- Chattahoochee National Forest
- Cherokee National Forest
- Croatan National Forest
- George Washington National Forest
- Jefferson National Forest
- Nantahala National Forest
- Oconee National Forest
- Pisgah National Forest
- Uwharrie National Forest

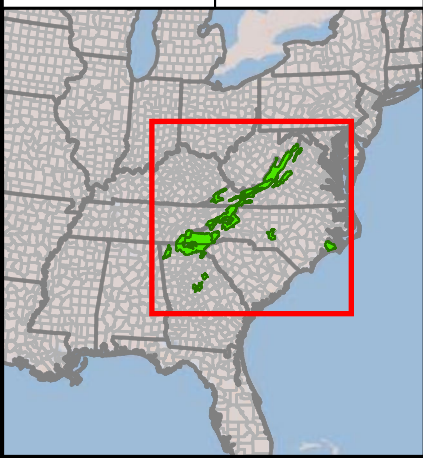


Scale: 1 in = 70 mi

Prepared by :
Copperhead Environmental Consulting, Inc.
471 Main Street
P.O. Box 73
Paint Lick, Kentucky 40461

Drawn by: TC Date: 10/19/2023

Checked by: MM Revision: 01



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 17N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Sources: USDA, ESRI, USGS, CEC
10/19/2023