



File Code: 1950

Date: November 19, 2003

Dear Forest User:

The Highlands Ranger District of the Nantahala National Forest is in the early stages of the Panthertown Trail Project and we'd like your comments. The project area is primarily in Jackson County and includes Panthertown Valley (recently designated the Elspeth and James McClure Clarke Forest) and part of the Bonas Defeat tract, which lies between Panthertown and the Tuckasegee River (see attached vicinity map). The purpose of the project is to protect sensitive habitat areas and provide a quality backcountry recreation experience for forest users. Actions currently being considered under the scope of this project include:

1. Identification of optimum trail locations and designation of appropriate use(s) and level of acceptable use for trails. Uses being considered are hiking, camping, horseback riding, rock climbing, llama trekking, mountain biking, viewing wildlife, photography, hunting and fishing.
2. Repair, replace or reconstruct bridges, culverts, or fords at stream crossings for safety and improvement of water quality.
3. Designation and improvement of camping sites at selected heavily used areas to reduce streamside erosion and wide-spread soil compaction.
4. Expansion of parking areas at Salt Rock, Cold Mountain, and Rock Bridge School entrances to the project area.
5. Development of a signing/interpretive plan to provide needed information to forest visitors.

Actions proposed within the project area fall in Management Areas 5 and 4D as designated in the Nantahala/Pisgah Land and Resource Management Plan as amended (the Forest Plan). Emphasis in Management Area 5 (Panthertown Valley) is in providing large blocks of backcountry where there is little evidence of other humans or human activities other than recreation use in a near primitive setting. There is no motorized use (other than administrative required for management and protection of the area) and no timber production. Management Area 4D (Bonas Defeat tract) emphasizes high quality habitat for wildlife requiring older forests and freedom from disturbance from motorized vehicles. Timber management which emphasizes this objective is permitted along with primarily nonmotorized recreation opportunities. A range of wildlife management activities are permitted in both Management Areas. The entire project area is a designated black bear sanctuary; hunting bear is prohibited.

Additional information about the project and maps will soon be available online at <http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc/nepa/nepa.htm>. Follow the "Panthertown Project" link. Public comments will be used to refine this proposal, explore new ideas (within Management Area limitations), and develop a range of action alternatives.



There are several ways you can be involved in this process:

1. A public meeting has been scheduled for December 15, from 6pm to 8pm at the Cashiers Library. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss current conditions and recommendations for possible trail improvements or provide us with any other thoughts you might have on the area or its use. Comment forms and initial proposal maps will be available.
2. Comments may be mailed electronically to our office, in a common digital format, to comments-southern-north-carolina-nantahala-highlands@fs.fed.us.
3. Comments may be mailed, hand delivered, or called in to: District Ranger, 2010 Flat Mountain Road, Highlands, NC 28741, fax (828) 526-5593, phone (828) 526-5593. Oral or hand delivered comments must be delivered Monday through Friday between 8:00 and 4:30.

Comments about this proposal must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after publication of this notice in The Highlander newspaper. Please include the following information:

1. Your name and address (phone number is optional).
2. Title of the Proposed Action (in this case "Panthertown Trail Project")
3. Specific substantive comments on the proposed action, along with supporting reasons, that the Responsible Official should consider in reaching a decision.

If public scoping does not reveal extraordinary circumstances, these actions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or an environmental assessment. These proposed activities fall within category 4 of Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, section 31.1b (Repair and maintenance of roads, trails, and landline boundaries) and category 1 of Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, section 31.2 (Construction and reconstruction of trails). Pursuant to 36 CFR 215.12, these types of actions are not subject to a higher level of review or to administrative appeal.

If you have any questions, would like additional information, or would like to discuss this proposal, please contact Jeff Owenby or myself at (828) 526-3765 or 2010 Flat Mountain Road, Highlands NC 28741.

Sincerely,

ERIN M. BRONK
District Ranger

Enclosure