CHAPTER 2  CHATTahooCHEE-OCONee NATIONAL FORESTS

WILDERNESS MANAGEMENT/ROADLESS AREAS

BACKGROUND

In 1964, the United States Congress passed the National Wilderness Act, giving legislated "Wilderness" recognition and designation to specified federally-owned lands. Ten wilderness areas totaling approximately 117,000 acres are located within the Chattahoochee National Forest. Designated wilderness lands are managed to preserve their natural qualities. Once designated, primarily the forces of nature affect these lands. Here humans are visitors, and natural physical and biological forces are normally allowed to proceed unrestricted by human influences. People and their behavior are managed to prevent or reduce unwanted human impact on wilderness values. Wilderness is a place to find solitude and enjoy a primitive and unconfined recreation experience, away from predominating sight and sound of other humans. Visitors are encouraged to practice ‘Leave No Trace’ ethics.

Among Georgia’s national forest communities of interest there is a wide spectrum of feelings and values for wilderness designation. Wilderness management concerns include:

- patterns and intensities of uses
- insect and disease management
- fire management, including the use of management-ignited fire
- incorporation of ‘limits of acceptable change’ concepts into plan direction
- mitigation of air pollution effects on wilderness resources

Roadless areas are places that have retained or are regaining a natural, untrammeled appearance – any signs of prior human activity are disappearing or being muted by natural forces. An individual roadless area must be at least 5,000 acres in size and include no more than one-half mile of improved road for each 1,000 acres. Should it ultimately take affect, the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (Roadless Rule) would place restrictions on road construction and reconstruction, and the cutting, sale, or removal of timber that could occur in inventories roadless areas. The exceptions where road construction or reconstruction activities and timber cutting or removal activities would be allowed were identified in 36 CFR 294.12 and 294.13 as of September, 2003. Final disposition of the Roadless Rule will include direction to the agency for the long term.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

GOAL 35  Provide the primitive or semi-primitive recreation experiences that are not available on other land ownerships.

GOAL 36  Wilderness areas are managed to provide their full range of wilderness resource benefits. Wilderness study areas (areas that have been recommended to Congress for designation) are managed to conserve their roadless characteristics.

OBJECTIVE 36.1  Develop the various wilderness plans for each existing designated wilderness, or additional wilderness designated prior to that date, within 15 years of Plan implementation. Examples of the required plans are the fire management plan and wilderness management plan.
GOAL 37 Obtain full public ownership of National Forest lands within wilderness boundaries, including subsurface rights.

GOAL 38 Manage wilderness, roadless, and other un-roaded areas to provide the social and ecological benefits that only they can offer.

STANDARDS

FW-149 The roadless character of inventoried roadless areas will be maintained so as to continue to meet Forest Service roadless area criteria.

FW-150 Do not exceed the Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) standards established in approved Wilderness Management Plans.

NOTE: Specific direction for designated Wilderness areas and wilderness study areas is found in Chapter 3, MRx 1.A and 1.B.


1.A DESIGNATED WILDERNESS AREAS

The Congressionally-designated wilderness areas on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests and their GIS acreage at the time of publication of this Plan are listed below. All these areas are on the Chattahoochee NF.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Designated Wilderness Area</th>
<th>Acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big Frog</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conutta</td>
<td>35,233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellicott Rock</td>
<td>2,073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Nantahala</td>
<td>12,949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raven Cliffs</td>
<td>9,113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brasstown</td>
<td>12,949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tray Mountain</td>
<td>10,414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich Mountain</td>
<td>10,343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blood Mountain</td>
<td>7,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Trail</td>
<td>16,880</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

EMPHASIS

Allow ecological and biological processes to progress naturally with little to no human influence or intervention. Minimum impacts made by those who seek the wilderness as a special place offering opportunities to experience solitude and risk in as primitive surroundings as possible may occur.

DESIRABLE CONDITION

The natural evolving landscape character in wilderness expresses the natural evolution of biophysical features and processes with very limited human intervention. The forest cover is primarily older forests with a continuous canopy, except for occasional gaps created by natural occurrences such as storms, insect or disease outbreak, and fire. Vegetation management is limited to trail clearing with hand tools. Natural ignition fires are permitted to play a natural role when weather, terrain, and external values at risk permit. Management of the area is focused on protecting and preserving the natural environment, natural processes, and heritage properties from human influences. Soil and water restorations in the form of rerouting trails or preventing camping along streams are encouraged. Recreation management is designed to provide solitude and remoteness in the most primitive and natural recreation setting possible. As Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) management findings occur for each designated wilderness, those standards will be adopted and monitored for compliance.

These areas would be characterized by 88 to 96 percent of the forest cover being mid-successional, late-successional, or potential old growth forests, with little to no human-caused forest openings. Of this amount, mid-successional forest occurs on approximately 8 percent. Old-growth forest communities would increase over the decades, except where significant natural disturbances occur. Natural processes such as ice storms or windstorms, insects, diseases, and lightening fires are the primary influences to vegetation. These processes would periodically remove the canopy and result in large and small areas of young and small trees. The average aggregate area affected would be
about 2 to 3 percent per decade. The range of canopy breaks includes the common occurrence of small gaps created by individual tree mortality, to frequent insect or disease-killed groups up to approximately one hundred acres, and infrequent large contiguous areas up to several hundred acres caused by storms or wildfire.

Existing old fields and openings for wildlife are not maintained, but are allowed to succeed to forest. New permanent wildlife openings are not created.

These areas have a Scenic Integrity Objective of Very High, which generally provides for ecological change only. Natural change is assumed to be visually acceptable and no active management is directed at moderating visual contrasts. Evidence of human intervention in the appearance of the landscape is minimal and would normally be overlooked by most visitors. Human-caused change may be specifically mitigated to be made less obvious.

Wilderness has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. Areas are managed for Primitive ROS except for those areas that have LAC management direction, even if the area does not meet inventory criteria. The recreation use emphasis is on dispersed activities such as hunting, fishing, or hiking, but localized and limited development that facilitates those uses may be located adjacent to the area. Wilderness may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historic value.

Most visitor information is dispensed outside of the wilderness at trailheads and through off-site public information and education efforts. Wilderness visitors are encouraged to “pack-it-in and pack-it-out” and to “leave no trace.” Signs are very limited. Visitors are expected to be rather skilled in the outdoors, self-reliant and well prepared. Visitors’ expectations and satisfaction will be monitored. Search and rescue or recovery is not readily available and motorized operations are constrained by decisions made by appropriate authority level.

Few facilities are provided. Permanent, human-made shelters are present if they existed prior to wilderness designation, particularly along the Appalachian National Scenic Trail. Construction of new shelters and primitive privies at new locations within wilderness is not allowed unless there is a need to protect natural resources from impacts of human visitors. Structures such as signs or bridges for the comfort or convenience of visitors in wilderness are minimal or may not exist. The information structures appearing in wilderness are generally for the protection of resources, visitors, or where present prior to wilderness designation. Forest designated trails in wilderness lie lightly on the land (typically narrow footpaths or horse trails) and have directional signing that blends with natural surroundings. Access to the area is limited. Only exterior boundary roads occur. Roads are well located, stable and suitable for use by the types of vehicles and during the use periods appropriate to the achievement of the emphasis for the area. Trailheads at surrounding roads are designed with sensitivity to scale and character to set the tone for experiencing a primitive recreation experience.

Travel and recreation within wilderness is strictly non-motorized. Although open roads may serve as boundaries to the area, its interior includes no open roads. Human access is by non-motorized means only.

Facilities are typically trails. Structures are rare. Existing facilities are maintained in serviceable condition with the emphasis on resource protection. They are not improved beyond their original design. In these areas, no new facilities are provided. The Appalachian National Scenic Trail is located within the Blood Mountain, Iray Mountain, Raven Cliffs, Mark Trail, and Southern Nantahala wildernesses. Wilderness management takes precedence over A.T. MRx 4.A., but is sensitive to its standards and emphasis. Refer to the 4.A. standards.
There are no wildlife habitat objectives for this prescription. Wildlife habitats are characterized by nearly unbroken tree canopy and old forest. Canopy removal occurs by natural events on about 2 to 3 percent of area per decade. Forest succession as a result of natural changes is gradually moving composition toward more tolerant species such as white pine, hemlock, beech, rhododendron, mountain laurel, red maple, sourwood, and blackgum. Large downed woody material, standing snags, and tree cavities are on a trend of increase. High-quality early-successional habitat rarely occurs and then usually as a result of a combination of tree mortality followed by wildfire.

Wilderness serves as a baseline or reference condition for natural ecological change as compared to ecosystems more recently modified by human use. Systematic landscape surveys will be conducted periodically on a sample basis for population health and trends of PETS species. Streams are periodically inventoried and monitored as needed to establish baseline or reference conditions or to monitor known T&E species. Once identified, locations of proposed, endangered, and threatened species populations are geo-referenced, generally as a point, and monitored periodically but not necessarily annually. Data collected is typically basic population-level (polygon) data. Research involving little or no specimen collection occurs on a special project basis. Minimal management to maintain habitat of known populations of T&E may occur with the written concurrence of the USFWS where a beneficial effect to the species has been established. National Forests will manage for the viability of all native and desirable nonnative species occurring on the forest.

Inventories will be conducted to identify significant heritage resources requiring monitoring and protection. Priority of heritage resource inventory areas within the wilderness will focus on areas of popular use such as trails and campsites, probability of containing significant heritage resources, and known heritage resources. Future heritage resource management will be determined during the development of wilderness plans.

STANDARDS

Lands and Special Uses

1A-001 Private lands within and adjacent to wilderness will be high priority for acquisition when such acquisition would improve the manageability of the wilderness.

1A-002 Private land trusts adjacent to wilderness boundaries will be encouraged.

1A-003 New utility corridors or communication sites will not be authorized within these areas.

1A-004 Other special uses such as outfitter/guide permits, may be authorized, if consistent and compatible with the goals and objectives of these areas.

Minerals and Geology

1A-005 Federal mineral leases and mineral material authorizations would not be allowed, unless provided for in the designating legislation.
1A-006 Information gathering activities that involve only very minor surface disturbance and are compatible with the wilderness environment are permissible by permit from the Forest Supervisor.

1A-007 Private mineral rights underneath National Forest surface ownership will be a priority for acquisition through exchange or donation.

Vegetation and Forest Health

1A-008 Native insect and diseases are not controlled, unless epidemics are expected to cause unacceptable damage to adjacent lands and resources and then only after appropriate approvals per the agencies implementing regulations of the Wilderness Act of 1964 and applicable amendments.

1A-009 Nonnative invasive pests are controlled, if expected to cause an unnatural loss to the wilderness resource.

1A-010 Noxious weeds may be eradicated by physical means such as grubbing when the infestations are isolated, and hand-applied chemicals may be used when absolutely necessary.

1A-011 Apply the current Minimum Requirement Decision Guide to wilderness management activities.

Fire Management

1A-012 Use suppression methods with the least detriment to wilderness, unless the fire is threatening public safety within the wilderness or resources and property outside the wilderness.

1A-013 Management-ignited prescribed fire can be used in wilderness only as provided for in FSM 2324.2.

1A-014 Natural ignition fires may be managed in wilderness to allow fires to play, as nearly as possible, their natural ecological role, as long as the applicable documentation has been prepared and approved.

1A-015 Emphasize Minimum Impact Suppression Techniques (MIST) when suppressing wildfires in wilderness.

1A-016 Use of motorized equipment in Wilderness will comply with FSM 2326. Regional Forester approval is required for the use of tractors in fire suppression. The Forest Supervisor may approve the use of limited mechanized equipment in Wilderness in instances of inescapable urgency and temporary need for speed beyond that available by primitive means.

Recreation

1A-017 ROS settings will be managed for Primitive ROS class, except for those areas that have Limits of Acceptable Change management direction.

1A-018 Design, construct, reconstruct, and maintain trails to the minimum standard necessary to minimize or prevent resource damage and protect the safety of wilderness users. Trails will appear to be part of the wilderness environment and not an intrusion upon it.
1.A-019 Appalachian National Scenic Trail: The following standards apply to the Appalachian Trail within designated Wilderness. See MRx 4.A.

A. Use of hand-held power tools, like chainsaws, to reopen trails following catastrophic natural events may be authorized by the Regional Forester.
B. Along the A.T. corridor, activities will be planned and carried out in cooperation with the appropriate A.T. management partner(s).
C. Horses and packstock are prohibited on the footpath of the A.T.
D. Existing A.T. shelters and associated facilities may be maintained.
E. Blazing is allowed on the Appalachian Trail.
F. Construct, relocate, and maintain the A.T. to the minimum standard necessary for protection of the soil, water, vegetation, visual quality, user safety, and long-term maintenance. Emphasize trails that appear to be part of the wilderness environment and not an intrusion upon it.
G. When existing trail shelters deteriorate to the point that they must be replaced or reconstructed, analyze the shelter location. When possible, relocate shelters to appropriate sites outside of Wilderness.

1.A-020 This area is closed to OHV use.

1.A-021 For the Ellicott Rock Wilderness, group camping size is limited to 12 people.

1.A-022 Apply visitor controls such as permitting, restrictions in party size, closure of portions of the Wilderness to camping, or similar measure as necessary to protect wilderness values

Scenery

1.A-023 Management activities are designed to meet or exceed the following Scenic Integrity Objectives, which vary by Inventoried Scenic Class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inventoried Scenic Class</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scenic Integrity Objectives</td>
<td>VH</td>
<td>VH</td>
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<td>VH</td>
<td>VH</td>
<td>VH</td>
<td>VH</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Facilities, Roads, and Access

1.A-024 Motorized access is prohibited.

1.A-025 Construction of roads or trails for motorized use is prohibited. Only exterior boundary roads occur.

1.A-026 Development of improvements will be in compliance with an approved wilderness plan.
Timber Management

1A-027 These lands are classified as unsuitable for timber production, withdrawn by Congress.

Fish and Wildlife

1A-028 Fish stocking by non-motorized means to restore native species is permitted.

1A-029 Stocking of nonnative fish by non-motorized means may be permissible provided that (1) stocking traditionally occurred before wilderness designation, and (2) the species is likely to survive and spawn.