



mountaintrue vistas

A Once-in-a-Generation Opportunity for Our National Forests

By Josh Kelly, Public Lands Biologist for MountainTrue

The Forest Service is accepting public comment on the draft forest management plan for all 1 million-plus acres of Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests.

This plan will set priorities and protections for the next 15-20 years of these public lands. The draft plan makes it clear that the Forest Service has made a real effort to listen to the public, and MountainTrue commends the agency for that. However, there is no single alternative that adequately addresses all the issues, and we urge the agency to create a new alternative for the final plan.

The Good

The draft plan includes three “action alternatives,” which are potential management models the Forest Service is considering for the final plan. Each of these alternatives – B, C, and D – would generally have the same results for ecological restoration, controlled burns, timber harvest, invasive plant control, and road and trail maintenance. This is a good thing, because when the outcomes don’t change in their basic numbers but only in the locations where the activities might occur, it shows that there doesn’t have to be conflict between the various interests in the forest.

We believe the non-polarizing alternatives and consistent plan goals will facilitate cooperation between interests that have historically seemed at odds, like wilderness advocates and the forest products industry. For example, Alternative B has the greatest flexibility for where timber management would occur as well as the highest recommendation for new acres of wilderness areas, making it clear that these two interests do not need to be in conflict.

The draft plan also created a new management area, called an Ecological Interest Area, which will support the native biodiversity of the forest.

The Bad

The draft plan does away with a current standard requiring any timber harvest on slopes of over a 40% incline to be accomplished with an aerial cable, where at least one end of the log is lifted off the ground, or another aerial logging method to reduce the risk of erosion and landslides.

There is also only one alternative, Alternative C, that would manage Big Ivy consistently with Buncombe



MountainTrue's Public Lands Biologist Josh Kelly discusses the draft Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Management Plan in a video now available at mountaintrue.org.

County’s resolution calling for the Forest Service to protect the area. Alternatives B and D would both schedule large portions of Big Ivy for timber harvest. All current Alternatives would also schedule many acres of Natural Heritage Natural Areas, existing old-growth forest, and roadless areas for timber harvest.

In addition, each proposed alternative has protective buffers of only 15 feet for intermittent streams – streams that don’t have visible water flowing during dry periods. Instead, we believe the plan should require a 50-foot buffer of protection from heavy equipment, such as bulldozers and skidders used in timber harvests, as a default.

Regarding recreation, there are proposed plan standards that would essentially cap the trail system at its current mileage. And there are proposed incentives to decommission trails that are further off the beaten path, while concentrating greater use in areas that are already being trampled. In a time of increasing outdoor recreation, it is crucial that the plan allows for new trails if there are resources available to build and maintain them at a high standard.

What’s Missing

Unfortunately, the draft plan does not include any certain protections for existing old-growth forests. The Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the plan documents that all ecosystems in Nantahala and Pisgah are deficient in old growth, very young forest, and open canopy forest. This is a result of factors like unsustainable logging 100-140 years ago and fire suppression, and cutting existing old growth will only make matters worse.

[continued on page 3](#)

Paddler Hemlock Treatment Team Treats Over 1,000 Trees

The PHHAT team is always up for a challenge.

The Paddlers Hemlock Health Action Taskforce (PHHAT), a partnership of whitewater paddlers who treat hemlocks in hard-to-reach areas of the Green River Gorge, has now treated well over 1,000 trees to protect them from the deadly hemlock woolly adelgid.

"We've been so impressed with the dedication and passion that local paddlers have brought to this effort," says Gray Jernigan, Green Riverkeeper with MountainTrue. "The PHHAT team is always up for a challenge."

PHHAT is a partnership between the Green Riverkeeper, Hemlock Restoration Initiative, American Whitewater, NC Wildlife Resources Commission, and local Green River paddlers. The members are also having discussions with other conservation groups about using this wildly successful model in other river systems.



Local paddler and kayak instructor Brian Davis measures a large hemlock tree on the Lower Green River during a PHHAT treatment day.



The PHHAT team on the riverbank of the Green River Gorge in November 2019.

Find out more and support this work at www.paddlersforhemlocks.com.



At the Solar Summit, MountainTrue's Communications Director Karim Olaechea films Enrique Sanchez of Trinity Presbyterian Church describing his congregation's solar project.

CCA Summit Collects Solar Stories, Creates Video

This winter, MountainTrue's Creation Care Alliance (CCA) program held its first Solar Summit – a gathering of people of faith who have successfully implemented solar energy at their congregations. "The summit included members of eight congregations in WNC, from Boone to Hendersonville, to share the successes, challenges and wisdom they learned from going through the solar process," says CCA Director Scott Hardin-Nieri.

At the end of the summit, MountainTrue's communications team filmed a video of the participants describing their projects and the lessons they learned along the way. "Our hope is for this video to be a resource for other congregations who may be interested in solar, but don't know where to start," Scott says, "so that more communities of faith can play a leading role in moving WNC to renewable energy."

To learn more and watch the Solar Summit video, visit creationcarealliance.org.

Listening Session Brings Western Region Partners Together

On January 31, MountainTrue's western regional office staff hosted a gathering of organizations from across the nine-county coverage area to share projects and opportunities to collaborate. A total of 15 organizations participated, including recreation, watershed, land conservation and community development groups.

"We learned a lot about what our partners are working on, and how we can support their efforts and fill gaps in the work," says MountainTrue's Western Regional Director Callie Moore. "Past experience has shown us that, by working with others, we can get a lot more accomplished."

MountainTrue Produces Native Plant Guide

You've asked and we've delivered! Our Public Lands team now offers a handy plant buyers' guide of wildlife-friendly plants native to our region. Many non-native plants are harmful to natural habitats, because they displace native species, lack proper nutrition and can even be deadly to native wildlife.

This guide includes plants that attract birds, mammals, pollinators and beneficial predator insects. They also have beautiful blooms and seasonally attractive foliage to adorn local yardscapes. Check out mountaintrue.org/plantguide to learn more.

Energy Innovation Task Force Transitions Following Success in Avoiding Peaker Plant

This January, the Energy Innovation Task Force (EITF) voted to transition to a new leadership model after successfully reaching several goals.

The EITF was a direct outgrowth of MountainTrue's advocacy to shut down the Asheville coal plant at Lake Julian," says MountainTrue Co-Director Julie Mayfield. "It brought together leaders from Asheville and Buncombe County governments, community stakeholders and Duke Energy to avoid the demand for a new 190-megawatt natural gas peaker plant."

That plant was originally scheduled to be built in 2023 and would have cost \$100 million. But the EITF's work to connect community members to energy efficiency and renewable energy programs has pushed the plant off of Duke's 15-year planning horizon. The EITF also helped get approval for the state's first two utility-scale microgrids – one in Hot Springs and another on Mt. Sterling in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Now, the EITF is looking to transition this work to a Community Council, which would help Buncombe County and Asheville reach their 100% renewable energy goals. "The work to move



An Energy Savers Network client and volunteer work together to install a new LED light fixture. Energy Savers Network has been a key player in the EITF's work to expand energy efficiency.

Buncombe County to clean, renewable energy will continue, and the effort to reach our community goals is better led at this point by members of the community rather than local governments and Duke Energy," Julie continues. "These three partners will remain engaged and focused on their internal renewable and carbon reduction goals, but we have confidence in the ability of our community partners to lead the larger effort going forward."

Forest Management Plan, continued from cover

The draft plan also lacks specific directions to protect Natural Heritage Natural Areas, which contain the best examples of rare species and natural communities in North Carolina. In every proposed Forest Plan alternative, between 34,000 and 68,000 acres of Natural Heritage Natural Areas are scheduled for timber harvest. The Forest Plan should prohibit logging in these unique and treasured areas.

Looking Ahead

Submitting a personal, specific comment is the best way to influence the final plan. Check out MountainTrue's website for resources on making your comments most effective. If we make our voices heard, the final alternative will be better than any of those currently proposed by the Forest Service.

To keep up with news and action opportunities related to the Forest Plan, visit mountaintrue.org.

High Country Members Speak Out Against Water Grab Proposal



The proposal would reclassify the Watauga River and open it up to water withdrawals and development.

This spring, High Country MountainTrue members submitted hundreds of written comments opposing a proposal by the Town of Beech Mountain to reclassify the Watauga River – a proposal that would open the river up to any number of water withdrawals and increased development in the future.

"The proposal seeks to install an intake in the Watauga to use it for drinking water," says MountainTrue's Watauga Riverkeeper Andy Hill, "even though Beech Mountain is still leaking over 47% of its annual water supply. By fixing leaking infrastructure and exploring other water sources like rainwater catchment systems and wells, we can meet our water needs without compromising the ecology and traditions of the Watauga River."

However, Beech Mountain Town Council did not allow public comment at the public meeting about the proposal on February 25, and unanimously voted to explore the water intake.

"We were disappointed by the undemocratic process at this meeting," Andy says, "but the town did commit to exploring wells and being more transparent about replacing water lines. These are outcomes our members called for in written comments."

The proposal now moves to the Watauga County Board of Commissioners, where it is widely opposed and unlikely to pass. However, MountainTrue will stay closely engaged in following the alternatives to the intake that Beech Mountain is now exploring, and ensuring that the Watauga River remains protected for future generations.



Asheville Office

29 N. Market St., Suite #610
Asheville, NC 28801
(828) 258-8737

High Country Regional Office

164 Depot St.
Boone, NC 28607
(828) 406-2429

Southern Regional Office

121 Third Ave. West, Ste. #1
Hendersonville, NC 28792
(828) 692-0385

Western Regional Office

90 Tennessee St., Ste. D
Murphy, NC 28906
(828) 837-5414



mountaintrue.org

Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 217
Asheville, NC



MountainTrue's Public Lands Director & Ecologist, Bob Gale, plants native Toad Trillium in his yard. See our website for more resources and activities you can do to help protect the places we share in the time of COVID-19.

Stay Connected in the Time of COVID-19

Join Us For Online Gatherings & Actions

In response to the spread of COVID-19, MountainTrue is doing our part to help reduce the spread of the virus and mitigate the health risks to our communities and staff. That means canceling in-person events, gatherings and workdays for this spring. In their place, we've created a resource center where you can access self-guided hikes with trail descriptions by our expert naturalists, a schedule of online gatherings, and tips on things you can do to relieve cabin fever and help your neighbors.

Learn more at mountaintrue.org/covid-19