

Don't sell off our property

On April 21, the Cherokee County Board of Commissioners unanimously approved a petition that, among other things, advocates for the land surrounding Hiwassee Lake to be made available to rich developers. It is an official document that purports to be on behalf of all 25,000 residents of the county.

I've not talked to a single resident who thinks this is a good idea. Quite the opposite. Everyone I've spoken to is vehemently against it.

Right now, the U.S. Forest Service doesn't sell land. It only trades it. But a provision in the "big beautiful bill" will create an unheard-of route to provide for the sale of the public lands that belong to all of us. If the provision passes, the federal government would be required to sell off between 2.2 and 3.3 million acres of land owned by the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service over the next five years.

The 11 states that would be affected by the proposal are Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming.

North Carolina is not on the list of affected states, but once the precedent is set we all know we will be next. Our county boasts some of most beautiful places on earth. If given half a chance, rich developers will come for it and, according to this petition, we'll be happy to give it to them. Right now, we can fish, hunt, camp and hike whenever we want. Selling it to the private commercial developers, or even making it a state park, will change all that – especially for the deer and bear hunters, as no hunting is allowed in state parks.

I would like to respectfully ask the commissioners to formally repeal and rescind this petition. It does not represent the views of the citizens of this county. Even though there are other things in the petition we might all agree on, selling our public lands to the rich developers is a step too far.

*Jason Chambers
Ogreeta*

**Opinion piece written
by Jason Chambers,
published in the
Cherokee Scout on
June 25, 2025*

Hanging Dog Campground shut down again



- ◆ *Mickens Branch recreation area to get upgrades, page 1C.*
- ◆ *Our View, page 4A.*

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Cherokee Scout April 11, 2018

Hanging Dog – After four years of fighting for Hanging Dog Campground, Cherokee County Commissioner C.B. McKinnon is not ready to walk away.

The U.S. Forest Service closed the campground last week for the second time in four years and announced plans to decommission the campground for good.

"They're going to take all the bathrooms out, abandon the wells and take everything they put into it," McKinnon said. "It will cost them more to decommission it than it would to fix it and open it."

The campground initially was closed in 2014 due to declining use and increased management costs as part of a comprehensive analysis of recreation sites across the national forests.

McKinnon and other local leaders, including U.S. Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), helped get the campground reopened in 2016 on a two-year deal full of contingencies. In addition, the county had to chip in for repairs and

upgrades that still fell short of what was needed to make the campground viable.

According to a Forest Service release, in both years the fees collected were well below operating and maintenance costs. The occupancy rate in 2017 was just 11 percent, down from 16 percent in 2016. "Furthermore, the aging facility has over \$160,000 in deferred maintenance needs," the release says.

"This has been a difficult decision because we know many families and friends have fond memories of camping there," forest supervisor Allen Nicholas said. "But the reality is fewer people camp there each season, and we need to focus our efforts on areas and activities where public use reflects higher demand to ensure that we are making the best use of our budget."

McKinnon remains frustrated that other counties in the region have campgrounds that are operated and funded by the Forest Service with no county contributions.

"It would take \$22,000 to run all the loops for a year, not just the two loops we have been running," he said. "That is such a small drop in the bucket for their budget."

McKinnon added that what

the county really needs is a new campground on the lake.

The Forest Service claimed in its release that within 50 miles of Hanging Dog, there are at least nine other Forest Service and six private campgrounds that offer similar or better facilities, including Jackrabbit Mountain Campground on Lake Chatuge. McKinnon said that answer is not satisfactory.

"This is a real black eye for the U.S. Forest Service in Cherokee County," he said. "They have 93,000 acres that we are paid pennies for, and we have to fight just to get that every year. Apparently, they own more property than they can manage here."

The closing comes at time when the Mickens Branch recreation area, which includes a campground, is being expanded by the Tennessee Valley Authority.

The Hanging Dog day-use area will remain open, with picnic tables overlooking the lake and nearby mountain biking and hiking trails.

Year-round access is available to Hiwassee Lake for boating and fishing, including an accessible fishing pier.

For details on recreation opportunities in the Nantahala National Forest, see <https://go.usa.gov/xQrP8>.