



KENTUCKY HEARTWOOD

Protecting the Beauty and Wellbeing of Kentucky's Native Forests

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July 22, 2021

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Public Comment: Red River Gorge Management Planning

To Mr. Kazmierski:

Kentucky Heartwood and the Kentucky Resources Council are providing comments concerning the draft Environmental Assessment and the Finding of No Significant Impact for the Red River Gorge Geological Area. We have included our recommendations to ensure the plan fits the law, science, and Forest Plan for the Daniel Boone National Forest.

Kentucky Heartwood (KHW) was founded in 1992 with a mission to protect and restore the integrity, stability, and beauty of Kentucky's native forests and biotic communities through research, education, advocacy, and community engagement. We present ~800 members living in Kentucky and across the United States.

The Kentucky Resources Council, is a membership-based nonprofit organization founded in 1984 with a mission to protect our built and natural communities from pollution and environmental damage.

Comments regarding the Proposed Action

Adaptive Management

Kentucky Heartwood acknowledges that adaptive management is codified, but it has very specific parameters that need to be met, and this proposal does not meet those parameters because so much of the plan does not disclose locations of proposed development. It is an easily manipulated and abused form of management and sometimes can allow important aspects of management to fall through the cracks and off the public's radar. We recognize that we must pursue this change through congressional action not at the specific forest level. However, the Forest Service must create a specific plan for the management of an area and not push agency actions to some post-decisional process internally.

The Proposed Action states:

While some of the actions proposed are site-specific, others are proposed using an adaptive management framework. Adaptive management provides an implementation tool that allows a desired future condition to be established, the initial management actions that can be used, and adjustments or additional actions that can be taken if needed to achieve the desired future condition. Many of the proposed actions identify an "up to" or maximum and do not specify the exact locations where the action will occur, which provides flexibility to account for inaccurate initial assumptions, to adapt to environmental conditions, and to respond to subsequent monitoring information. (Red River Comprehensive, pg. 7)

For adaptive management to be legal, the Forest Service must include exact locations of actions and then specify triggers, thresholds, and very specific monitoring plans and actions for how to respond to adverse changes. The Red River Gorge Management Plan seems to lack triggers, thresholds, and specific monitoring plans and actions for certain aspects. We will address those issues throughout this comment. We acknowledge that the Visitor Capacity Analysis for the Red Wild and Scenic River (Visitor, pg. 12-14) and the Comprehensive River Management Plan for the Red Wild and Scenic River (Red River Comprehensive, pg. 31-34) does include thresholds, triggers, and actions.

Deferring Field Surveys

It also seems the agency is deferring field surveys until after a decision is signed. This is unacceptable and does not fit any framework within adaptive management. From the Proposed Action:

Field surveys will assess current conditions and provide site-specific information prior to implementation. Design elements also identify monitoring methods to be used to determine effectiveness of actions and trigger modification of actions as needed to meet intended effects. Both the site-specific and adaptive management actions identified below rely on these deferred resource surveys before implementation. (Red River Comprehensive, pg. 7)

The Forest Service needs to identify and show citizens the locations of designated campsites, designated trails (both where trails will be removed and established), exact plans for parking lots, all proposed designated shuttle stops, picnic sites, restrooms (out of all floodplains and away from riparian areas), all boat launch locations (during the public presentation from June 22, 2021, Forest Service officials mentioned that there may be plans for another boat ramp at an undisclosed location), all river access points, all cliffside slated for hardening and stabilization, where unauthorized campsites and trails will be decommissioned or restored, rehabilitation of other impacted sites and water access points. The Red River Gorge Geological Area is well-mapped. While it would take some time to put this together, it's important for citizens to see the full scope of the plan.

Campsites

Please disclose the location of the 200 backcountry campsites. This could drastically change the character of primitive areas in the Red River Gorge.

Please disclose the location of the 10 group campsites proposed for the backcountry. It's hard to tell what kind of impact these campsites may have on the landscape or how it would degrade the experience in primitive areas.

Table 2 entitled “Proposed Designated Campsites and Non-motorized Trails” gives maximum numbers but does not at all give any details about the location and amenities provided or trail locations, but just the ROS spectrum.. It’s not a helpful table and lacks site-specific details.

Table 2 also mentions establishing up to 60 backcountry campsites in the Clifty Wilderness and 15 backcountry campsites along the wild segment of the Red River in the Clifty Wilderness. This issue will be addressed in another section of our comments as it is a direct violation of the Wilderness Act. Please analyze an alternative that includes limiting the user capacity in Wilderness by implementing a free permitting system that includes a mandatory read-through of laws and regulations governing Wilderness before permits are issued. Decommissioning illegal dispersed campsites along with a permit system and a bigger presence of Wilderness Rangers should alleviate the need to establish designated campsites in Wilderness. This will give Wilderness rangers the ability to enforce laws and regulations and no more “We didn’t know” scenarios. Wilderness is our highest form of landscape protection, but it is also a place that should be a self-willed landscape that provides solitude. We’ll address this issue further in the “Wilderness” comments section.

Designated Trails

35-Foot Footbridge Across Edwards Branch

The Forest Service needs to consult with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the United States Army Corp of Engineers and make the consultation and concurrence letters available on the Red River Gorge Management Plan project page before a decision is signed. It’s hard to tell how permanent this footbridge may be without any details in the proposed action. Please describe the details of the footbridge. Will there be in-stream work? Are there any listed species in Edwards Branch that need to be considered?

Transportation and Parking

Has the Forest Service considered or adequately analyzed establishing free parking sites outside of the Red River Gorge to relieve the need to develop parking inside the RRGGA since the agency is proposing to build 28 shuttle stops? We know that not all parking can be confined to outside of the Red River Gorge, and any parking lots outside of the Forest Services jurisdiction could be subject to fees. Maybe there is a solution that local counties could provide parking and shuttle stops since visitors directly impact their local economies. It’s a tough issue, but illegal parking is not only a convenience issue but also a safety issue especially if cars are blocking emergency vehicle access.

Visitor Amenities

Table 4 does not adequately identify the site-specific locations of designated parking areas, new shuttle stops, new picnic sites, or restrooms. Unisex restrooms must be located outside of any floodplains or riparian areas. The Red River, especially in the recreational section, is plagued by E. Coli according to the agency’s analysis. While much of it is coming from communities up stream, let’s not compound the problem within the Red River Gorge Geological Area either.

Boat Launches

The Forest Service has only identified two potential boat launches. Please provide the location of all proposed boat launches and any consultation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the United States Army Corp of Engineers and/or concurrence letters. This should not be pushed off to a post-decisional process. These locations should also comply with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

to fit the level of development allowed in the recreational segment of the Red River. Has any of this been done? It should be done and ready for citizen analysis before the EA/FONSI is signed.

River Access Points

We are glad the Forest Service is reducing the number of unauthorized water access points from 40 down to five. Again, because this is instream work, and substantial work is proposed at Jump Rock (log jam structure in bank) please provide consultation and/or concurrence letters from the USFWS and the USACE before a decision is signed. Also, these locations should be fully identified, which they are not.

Cliffside Access Stabilization and Hardening

The Forest Service should refrain from establishing any permanent structures to stabilize and harden cliff sides in the Clifty Wilderness. Any work to protect the character of the Wilderness resource should not include any use of motorized and mechanized equipment as required by the Wilderness Act. Maybe the Forest Service has no plans to do this, but since this seems to be an open-ended proposal, this needs to be made very clear.

Restoration of User-Created Impacts

It's sad to read that 650 unauthorized campsites and 150 miles of unauthorized trails dot and crisscross the RRGGA. This wasn't just because of an influx of visitors because of COVID-19, this is due to years of the Forest Service abdicating their responsibility to protect the Red River Gorge. This should never have been allowed to persist. We appreciate that the Forest Service has plans to rehabilitate the area, which could be very costly and time consuming. Once decommissioning is complete, it will be imperative for the Forest Service to protect this work with a larger presence of law enforcement officers (front country and backcountry rangers) and Forest Service personnel authorized to write tickets for infractions. Education is important, but enforcement makes the education real, especially for those who operate above the law. What are the agency's plans for funding the restoration work and the plan for hiring more Forest Service personnel. A volunteer-based plan and crew is not enough to undo this travesty.

Forest Orders

Camping and Fires

It's fine to designate campsites in the front country. We support that. We do not support designating campsites in the Clifty Wilderness. This is a violation of the Wilderness Act, and the Forest Service should analyze alternatives that include creating a free backcountry permit system that includes required reading of all laws, regulations, and forest orders before a permit is issued. Failure to abide by permit will result in further action.

It is unclear how the Forest Service plans to "prohibit open fires in the Clifty Wilderness." If this means putting in structures such as fire pits, that is a non-starter per the Wilderness Act. Across the US, river users are required to carry fire pans. What if the Forest Service required the use of fire pans in the backcountry? It's hard to keep people from starting fires anywhere. Requiring a fire pan would put the responsibility and the onus on the user if they want a fire. If a wildland fire starts, and a free permit system is in place, it could make it possible to find and fine the culprits. We are trying to think outside of the box. There are collapsible fire pans on the market. If folks really want a fire,

make them work for it. This kind of requirement is not different from requiring certain food storage containers, for example.

Riparian, Rockshelter, and other off-trail protections

This is really the only place in the whole plan that talks about managing rock climbing.

1. Prohibit bicycles and equestrian use in the Red River Gorge Geological Area and Clifty Wilderness, as depicted in figure 7 in Appendix B11 .

Sometimes there just isn't enough physical space to accommodate certain user groups or the terrain is too dangerous because of topography. A monitoring and enforcement plan should be in place to ensure no user-created trails are being created. Also, this is a great example of being specific about your plans. We'd like to see more of this in the plan.

2. Within the rest of the project area outside the RRGGA and Clifty Wilderness, prohibit bicycles and horses within all riparian corridors, except at designated stream crossings on National Forest System trails.

A monitoring and enforcement plan should be in place to ensure user created trails are not being created.

3. Within the rest of the project area outside the RRGGA and Clifty Wilderness, prohibit bicycles and horses from approaching within 100 yards of clifflines and rockshelters, unless on designated system trails or other designated locations (such as hitching rails, bike racks, etc.).

This is acceptable and necessary to reduce risk.

4. Establish a 100 yard "no public entry" buffer around the perimeter of developed recreation sites, such as picnic sites and river access points, within riparian corridors.

Yes. The world is not your parking lot.

5. Prohibit entry into restoration areas using boulders, natural barriers, and temporary fencing and signage.

Yes, natural barriers are important. I would refrain from putting up any temporary fencing in Wilderness. It's not clear if that is being considered in this proposal.

6. **Prohibit installation of new bolts and fixed anchors in the Clifty Wilderness.**

Yes. This is important. What concerns Kentucky Heartwood is that this is the only place in all of the documents that make up the Red River Gorge Management Plan that discusses rock climbing. You've attempted to address confining hiking, river activities, biking and equestrian activities, but nowhere in this document do you look at one of the biggest recreational activities that draws people to a geological area.... rock climbing.

Installations and bolts are inconsistent with the Wilderness Act as they are considered permanent and oftentimes require motorized and mechanized equipment to drill them into the rock permanently eroding the sedimentary rock that makes up the

Gorge. Banning permanent climbing anchors in Wilderness is imperative to protect Wilderness character.

Kentucky Heartwood suggests that the Forest Service consider creating and adopting a forest-wide Climbing Management Plan, just as they are creating a Comprehensive River Management Plan, This will define where rock climbing is acceptable and not acceptable in the Red River Gorge and beyond. It would also require the agency to look at how climbing may impact PET species through consultation with other federal agencies.

We added the bold emphasis to draw particular attention to this concern. The Red River Gorge is recognized internationally for rock climbing opportunities, making it imperative to really establish a game plan. Other national forests have implemented Climbing Management Plans and this should be considered for the whole Daniel Boone National Forest.

7. Prohibit launching and take out of paddle craft or tubes at any location other than those designated, except under emergency circumstances.

Yes. Please make sure to hire enough River Rangers to enforce this.

Forest Plan Administrative Changes

Kentucky Heartwood and the Kentucky Resources Council addressed our concerns in a separate letter because the Forest Service needs to provide better maps to compare the current Red Wild and Scenic River corridor with the proposed 86 acre change. It is unclear how the river corridor will change based upon the maps provided and how that may impact the river corridor in light of requirements in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Also, please see the letter about our concerns about a typographical error in the SIO section of the Forest Plan. We would like to see how the Forest Service created the SIOs in the 2004 Forest Plan to see if it is actually a typographical error or rather a way to change the Forest Plan to allow more development without violating the Forest Plan for the Daniel Boone National Forest.

The lack of information provided for the administrative changes to the Forest Plan opens up a lot of speculation. Providing quality information reduces speculation.

Soils

According to the Management Plan:

No standards and guidelines for soils are identified in the forest plan that pertain to this project and proposed activities.

There should be standards for this in the Forest Plan. We would suggest that the Forest Service focus on this as an amendment or administrative change to the Forest Plan or this should be fully fleshed out when the Forest Service embarks on the Forest Plan Revision beginning in 2023.

Hydrology

The proposed plan states:

A section 7 analysis of proposed boat launches and river access points has been completed to ensure consistency with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and protection of the free-flowing characteristics of the Red Wild and Scenic River.

How is it possible that the Forest Service can claim complete compliance with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act if they have not identified all of the boat launch and river access points. The agency is claiming they will use adaptive management to figure this out after the decision is signed. This is unacceptable. Please provide the analysis for the public.

Fish and Wildlife (combined)

The Forest Service needs to complete consultation and/or provide concurrent letters from the United States Fish and Wildlife Service before a decision is signed to ensure compliance with the Endangered Species Act. The Forest Service has not conducted any surveys for federally-listed Indiana bats or northern long-eared bats in the project area. The agency admits that management activities may impact these species. Adaptive management does not allow the Forest Service to complete this step post-decision. The time is now before an EA is signed. Please post any consultation or concurrence letters on the project page found on the Daniel Boone National Forest website.

It's impossible to claim a Finding of No Significant Impact without consulting federal agencies for all PET listed species present or possibly present in the project area.

Scenery

This is part of the proposed administrative change to the Forest Plan, and yet, the proposed management plan states:

No standards and guidelines for scenery management are identified in the forest plan.

This seems like a deficiency in the forest plan if there are objectives and goals but no standards or guidelines in the Forest Plan. How will the Service maintain SIOs without standards and guidelines in the Forest Plan?

Heritage

Please provide consultation and/or concurrence letters from the State Historic Preservation Office and the Tribal Historic Preservation Office before a decision is signed.

This is also a curious statement:

Following the Programmatic Agreement and completing Section 106 consultation, along with implementing project design elements Arch-1 through Arch-5, ensures project consistency with this forest plan standard.

This statement implies that now consultation has been completed. Adaptive management does not allow the Forest Service to conduct consultation post-decision.

Wilderness and Inventoried Roadless Areas

Designating campsites in Wilderness is a direct violation of the Wilderness Act, and your proposal is on shaky legal grounds. We suggest the Forest Service tread lightly here and analyze alternatives that avoid establishing campsites in the backcountry. I do not see any evidence in any of the documents otherwise.

This is not an isolated problem to the Daniel Boone National Forest. Wilderness areas across the country are grappling with degraded Wilderness character because of various pressures.

Please do not compromise the Wilderness Act because you are exasperated by the users. Make some changes to how you manage the people, not how you manage the place. Permanent structures like camp rings and designated campsites degrade unwilled and untrammelled Wilderness.

Please consider the following:

1. Establish a free-permit system for backcountry travel
2. Require permit applicants to read laws and regulations pertaining to Wilderness travel and sign an agreement to abide. This allow for rigorous enforcement
3. Require users to carry portable fire pans in the backcountry. It is unclear what kind of plans the Forest Service is proposing in terms of developing designated campsites in the backcountry. Please expand upon your idea so it can be analyzed using the Wilderness Act.
4. Hire more Wilderness and River Rangers to enforce the laws.

Issues with Wilderness Act of 1964 Compliance

Kentucky Heartwood is concerned about the Forest Service's willingness to violate the Wilderness Act by directing the experience of users in the backcountry by developing campsites. This was never the intent of the Wilderness Act and the Forest Service needs to make some hard choices that users may not like. That should not include arguments that because the area is becoming overrun and degraded that it should be developed to protect Wilderness character. Or making some kind of argument that solitudeThat's twisted logic. Please step back and think about how you can adequately manage the people without permanent structures (we can't tell what plans the Forest Service actually has for developing campsites in Wilderness)

From the plan:

Opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation is a more subjective quality of wilderness character, characterized by isolation from sights, sounds, and presence of others and human developments. Designating campsites may create a sense of confinement or human development and thereby have a negative impact on primitive and unconfined recreation, but the existing unmanaged campsites negatively impact opportunities for solitude. Currently, campsites are often clustered together, visible from the trail, with sights and sounds of other campers nearby. In some locations, unauthorized campsites are located on or immediately adjacent to the trail. This situation detracts from solitude for both campers and hikers within Clifty Wilderness. Designation of campsites would have a positive impact on solitude.

Solitude is not subjective. It's either present or not. And it is worthy of protecting, but not by confining users to designated camping spots. The agency is basically permanently downgrading the Wilderness area to a National Recreation Area or even less.

Forest Policy says that designating campsites in wilderness is a last resort. We don't think you've hit "last resort." We think you've abdicated your responsibility to the Wilderness resource and don't see any easy way out.

We researched if other agencies have proposed or implemented designated campsites in Wilderness and could not find any evidence of such management actions. Please do not be the first to violate this very important piece of legislation.

Here are some other recommendations for analysis:

- Any permit system should be set up as a “first come, first served” system open to all members of the public without a user fee;
- Retain the current campfire set back of 100 feet from trails and water;
- Increase Forest Service presence and visitor education in the Clifty Wilderness; and
- Analyze indirect methods for limiting or reducing impacts in these Wildernesses that don’t confine visitors once they enter, including discouraging marketing of the areas, providing more primitive trailheads and access to trailheads, lower trail standards and maintenance levels, and fewer developments designed to facilitate easier access.
- Any work should be done with the least primitive tools that fit with the mandate to avoid motorized and mechanical equipment in Wilderness.

Executive Orders

EO 12898, Environmental Justice – identify and address disproportionately high and adverse effects on minority and low-income populations.

Project activities are anticipated to have beneficial effects to the local economy including potential to provide economic opportunities for minority and low-income populations. New fees are not proposed as part of this decision. The current fee structure will remain in place and may be modified over time in accordance with the Recreation Enhancement Act. The proposed project will not reduce access to the national forest for any person or population, and it will enhance accessibility through improved infrastructure and recreation opportunities.

We appreciate that the Forest Service will not propose any new fees as part of this decision. The Daniel Boone National Forest is adjacent to some of the poorest counties in the United States. While visitors may be willing to pay more for their experience and for maintenance (we see the offer and willingness to pay more in public comments), this willingness may cause an undue burden on others who also should benefit from enjoying public lands. Extra fees also act as an extra tax. Citizens already pay for public lands upkeep through our tax dollars. This an equity issue, and fees create a tiered pay-to-play system. Any future fees should align with the Federal Land Recreation Enhancement Act.

EO 14008, Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad – requires a coordinated approach from planning to implementation in addressing climate change.

Proposed project activities would help to build climate resilience in the Gorge, under Executive Order 14008, issued on January 27, 2021, by reducing bare soil and erosion, restoring areas with native vegetation, and providing sustainable infrastructure to support existing recreational uses and visitor numbers while reducing impacts to resources.

Sustainable infrastructure is an oxymoron. There is no such thing. Please work to focus more on reducing bare soil and erosion and protecting the resource that already exists there.

Conclusion

These comments may not cover all of our issues with the Red River Gorge Management Planning document, but we have done our best to highlight initial concerns.

There are some good things in this document, but overall, we are concerned that adaptive management is being used to push off decisions to a post-decisional process, and the Forest Service needs to provide a complete plan of action now, not later. Citizens deserve a full plan to analyze.

Please reverse course on your plans to violate the Wilderness Act, consider creating and adopting a Climbing Management Plan, review the proposed administrative changes to the Forest Plan and provide more information, identify site-specific locations for all agency actions, and provide consultation and concurrence letters before any decision is signed.

We know that is asking a lot of the agency, but it fulfills the agency's responsibilities under the law.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ashley Lipscomb". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with a large loop at the end of the last name.

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