



Graham County Board of County Commissioners

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To whom it may concern:

Graham County is unique compared to other counties in the Nantahala National Forest in that the forest comprises over 65% of the lands inside Graham County's borders. Only Swain has more federal land holdings than Graham in the Nantahala National Forest boundaries, with Swain's total acreage being primarily National Park lands vs. Graham's being National Forest lands.

The Graham County Board of Commissioners at this point in the Forest Management Plan process has concluded that we prefer Plan B with some modifications. Having such a large portion of our land base in the National Forest makes it necessary for Graham County to seek economic benefit from those lands. The PILT funds from that property is a pittance of its real value and Graham County needs those forest lands to generate revenue for county government and to continue to generate funding that partially supports our school system.

1) Timber sales/harvesting has been our number one goal from the onset of this process. While all alternatives increase the overall totals of timber harvest over time we don't think it goes far enough. We want to see an increase above the projections. Because Alternative B has the most land where timber production could occur, it would allow the biggest increase on paper. But, we don't want another 20 years of broken promises; we want to see work happening on the ground. If another alternative would get more done because it has more support, then the Forest Service should explain why that is the case.

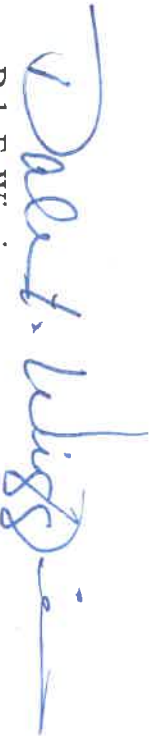
2) Graham County feels that all four of the plan models have too much age set aside as back country and old growth areas. We don't disagree with the principle of old growth management and the importance of old growth and we do not believe it should be prioritized for timber production, but we do feel that the methodology of determining what is actual old growth and what is actual back country is skewed. Back country is a misleading title for how it's used in this process. Many outside the process would think of this as areas that are accessible and used for recreation purposes but that is not the case. Old growth designation is in many cases a misnomer since most of the lands inside Graham County's borders have at some point been logged and evidence of that is common. We feel that the amount of acreage in both of these designations should be reduced significantly and do not support current levels of these designations. If old growth designations are being used to restore old growth in the future as opposed to protecting actual old growth now, we understand that, but these designations should not continue to grow. If the Forest Service designates new patches, it should remove others so they can be harvested.

3) Recreation opportunities as outlined in Plan B fall short of plans C and D levels. Graham County wants to see more opportunities for recreation included in Plan B. Persons who will come to visit these National Forests provide economic benefits to the county as a result of recreational activities inside the forests. Part of that increased recreation is accomplished by better and more access to the forest. We feel that more roaded areas should be made available for use and access so that more people can enjoy the forests from within and more site development for primitive camping and group camping as well. We note that the draft plan includes the Partnership recommendation to increase open road access, and that should be kept in the final plan.

4) Graham County does not support the designation of additional Wilderness Areas and does not support the designation of Wilderness Study Areas. The limited access to the forests combined with current management practices in our opinion literally creates wilderness areas by taking no action. The current restrictions on areas where some activity like timber harvest has been done doesn't allow for continued activity in those areas for a period of years after the harvesting has been completed thereby in a sense creating a wilderness like area. We feel that no area should be off limits to future activity simply because it may have had some activity in the past. We also recognize that the Partnership has agreed that Snowbird should not be designated wilderness until other needs are met first, and we welcome the Partnership's help to meet economic needs. Management has been out of balance in Graham County and wilderness supporters need to prove that economic development can be balanced with wilderness.

5) Graham County feels that many of the processes used across the US Forest Service management plans are cumbersome and flawed. Example is the NEPA process that could be and should be completed in less than 12 months but often takes years to complete. We believe many of the processes should be streamlined to use data that is constantly being collected and cataloged. The data gathered during the years of plan revision should be used to make decisions that will make projects move more quickly.

Graham County desires to have a good working relationship with the US Forest Service. Having economic benefit from the forests from multiple means is critical to the needs of our citizens. We hope that you will consider our point of view going forward and look forward to the completion of the planning process and its implementation.



Dale E. Wiggins
Chairman, Graham County Board of Commissioners