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Ron Hudson – District Ranger
Croatan Ranger District
141 E. Fisher Ave.
New Bern, NC 28560

Re: Neuse River Recreation Sites Draft Environmental Assessment

Ladies and Gentlemen:

On behalf of Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (Friends), I am pleased to submit these comments on the Neuse River Recreation Sites Draft Environmental Assessment (the Draft EA). Friends is the lead nonprofit organization supporting and advocating for the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST), North Carolina's flagship state hiking trail which stretches 1,175 miles across the state from Clingmans Dome to Jockey's Ridge. We support the MST in three main ways: building and maintaining trail with volunteer crews, enhancing the trail route, and inspiring people to use and support the trail.

Our interest in this analysis arises because the MST incorporates the Neusiok Trail, whose northern terminus is at Pine Cliff Recreation Area; and because Pine Cliff, Flanners Beach and Fisher Landing Recreation Areas are all accessible from our Neuse River Paddle Route. The Neusiok Trail is one of the most popular sections of the MST in the Coastal Plain. In March 2020, we published a guide, *Great Day Hikes on North Carolina's Mountains-to-Sea Trail*, which includes two hikes on the Neusiok and has raised the profile of the trail. Because of the storm damage, we were forced to omit the northern section beginning at Pine Cliff Recreation Area, our first choice, but our goal is to include it if we publish a second edition.

In general, we support the restoration of the recreation sites along the Neuse River. The sites are important recreational resources in an area that currently appears to have inadequate opportunities. As such, they are of great value both to MST users and to the broader public. We do, however, have some concerns about the Draft EA:

Omission of Neusiok Trail

We are disappointed that the Draft EA does not address the Neusiok Trail, apparently deferring any discussion to a later "Neusiok Trail Repairs and Reroute" decision (p. 32). As arguably the single most outstanding nonmotorized recreation amenity in all of Eastern North Carolina, and certainly the flagship trail on the Croatan National Forest, the Neusiok is a resource of statewide if not national significance. We are concerned that the segmentation of this analysis will further delay much-needed restoration of the northern part of the trail.

Of even more concern, addressing the trail separately from the other aspects of the Pine Cliff restoration project will likely result in greater impacts and disruptions than if they were all analyzed and implemented together, and it is conceivable that decisions pursuant to the first analysis would preclude proper trail design and construction in the next phase. Although we have no wish to further delay restoration of the sites covered by the Draft EA, we strongly recommend that, at a minimum, the analysis of the Neusiok Trail be performed before construction begins at Pine Cliff to avoid any surprises.

Flanners Beach

Although the primary purpose and need for this project is defined as access to water-based recreation, the Draft EA does not refer to any water access at Flanners Beach, either in the text (p. 15) or in the accompanying map (p. 45). Although we certainly expect that connections between the campground and day use area and the river are contemplated, they should be explicitly described.

Thank you for considering these comments, and if you have any additional questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at jgrode@mountainstoseatrail.org or 828-231-6522.

Sincerely,



Jim Grode
Trail Resource Manager

Cc: Dave Head and Smith Raynor, NC Division of Parks and Recreation