



◻ North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission ◻

M. Kyle Briggs, Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Troy Waskey
Nantahala District Ranger

FROM: Andrea Leslie, NC Wildlife Resources Commission *Andrea Leslie*
Habitat Conservation Program

DATE: January 9, 2026

SUBJECT: NCWRC Comments on the Northside Restoration Project Draft Environmental Assessment

Biologists with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) reviewed the US Forest Service's (USFS) draft Environmental Assessment for the Northside Restoration Project in Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties. Comments from the NCWRC on this project are offered for your consideration under provisions of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (48 Stat. 401, as amended; 16 U.S.C. 661 et seq.) and the North Carolina Environmental Policy Act (G.S. 113A-1 et seq., as amended; 1 NCAC-25).

The Northside Project includes 2,274 acres of proposals to improve wildlife habitat, improve forest composition, and harvest wood products in the Great Balsam Geographic Area. On-the-ground goals for the project include the following:

- Conserve and restore high elevation red oak forests, northern hardwood forests, spruce-fir forests, and mesic oak forests, emphasizing restoration of spruce-fir habitat for the Carolina northern flying squirrel and maintain health and resiliency of this forest type in the face of climate change.
- Reduce off-site white pine and restore hardwood stands.
- Restore or maintain the red spruce bogs in Alarka Laurel.
- Enhance structural conditions for ruffed grouse, deer, and turkey by providing more young forest.

The proposed management activities include silvicultural treatments such as two-aged shelterwood removal, overstory thinning, post-harvest site preparation for natural regeneration, midstory removal for oak, crown touch thinning, and dry oak woodland thinning, wildlife and fisheries habitat improvements, prescribed burning, temporary road construction, reconstruction of existing classified Forest Service network roads, and trail maintenance.

We support this project, as it should benefit habitat for rare and common, game and non-game species. We also provided specific recommendations and comments on the Scoping Record in September 2024 (attached), and these still apply to this project.

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this project. We greatly appreciate our continued partnership with the USFS to improve wildlife habitats in the district. Please feel free to contact me at (828) 400-4223 if you have any questions about these comments.

ec: Ryan Jacobs, Chris Kelly, David Stewart, NCWRC



◻ North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission ◻

Cameron Ingram, Executive Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Troy Waskey
Nantahala District Ranger

FROM: Andrea Leslie, NC Wildlife Resources Commission *Andrea Leslie*
Habitat Conservation Program

DATE: September 19, 2024

SUBJECT: NCWRC comments on the Northside Restoration Project Scoping Notice

Biologists with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) reviewed the US Forest Service's (USFS) Scoping Notice for the Northside Restoration Project in Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties. Comments from the NCWRC on this project are offered for your consideration under provisions of the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (48 Stat. 401, as amended; 16 U.S.C. 661 et seq.) and the North Carolina Environmental Policy Act (G.S. 113A-1 et seq., as amended; 1 NCAC-25).

The Northside Project includes 2,211 acres of proposals to improve wildlife habitat, improve forest composition, and harvest wood products in the Great Balsam Geographic Area. On-the-ground goals for the project include the following:

- Conserve and restore high elevation red oak forests, northern hardwood forests, spruce-fir forests, and mesic oak forests, emphasizing restoration of spruce-fir habitat for the Carolina northern flying squirrel and maintain health and resiliency of this forest type in the face of climate change.
- Reduce off-site white pine and restore hardwood stands.
- Restore or maintain the red spruce bogs in Alarka Laurel.
- Enhance structural conditions for ruffed grouse, deer, and turkey by providing more young forest.

The proposed management activities include silvicultural treatments such as two-aged shelterwood removal, overstory thinning, post-harvest site preparation for natural regeneration, midstory removal for oak, crown touch thinning, and dry oak woodland thinning, wildlife and fisheries habitat improvements, prescribed burning, temporary road construction, reconstruction of existing classified Forest Service network roads, and trail maintenance.

Within areas for silvicultural management (excluding prescribed burning), rare and listed species include the following:

- Mountain Catchfly [*Silene ovata*, NC Special Concern (SC)] in an area slated for irregular shelterwood removal
- Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*, NC Threatened) in the Alarka-Laurel area slated for spruce restoration

We support this project, as it should benefit habitat for rare and common, game and non-game species. Specific recommendations and comments include the following:

Alarka-Laurel Spruce Restoration

NCWRC supports the effort to conserve and restore the Alarka Red Spruce stand for Northern Saw-whet Owl and Red Crossbill. Recent surveys (2021) have documented Northern Saw-whet Owl. Mature, cone-bearing spruce trees are an important food source for Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*, NC Special Concern). Please note that Carolina Northern Flying Squirrel (CNFS, *Glaucomys sabrinus coloratus*, US and NC Endangered) is not known to occur in this spruce stand. This area is outside of areas designated by US Fish and Wildlife Service as Geographic Recovery Areas for CNFS and nest box surveys have only resulted in capture of Southern Flying Squirrel and Red Squirrel.

Golden-winged Warbler Habitat Management

NCWRC supports the improvement of Golden-winged Warbler (GWWA, *Vermivora chrysoptera*, NC SC) habitat. The Northside project falls within a GWWA Focal Area, providing an important opportunity to create nesting habitat and, with some modifications, retain nesting cover longer. Two-aged timber harvests with scattered trees attract male GWWAs which use the retained trees as song perches.

Equally important is high quality herbaceous nest cover sought by female GWWAs. Within silviculture-managed landscapes in western NC, female GWWAs construct their nests along features associated with timber harvest units – including system roads, temporary roads, log landings, and skid trails. We support this proposal to incorporate goldenrod and other forbs for nesting along roads, landings, skid trails. Brushy temporary roads are especially valuable for their mix of forbs (goldenrods, fleabanes), blackberry, pokeweed, etc., where female GWWAs build their nests on the ground. NCWRC would like to have the option to keep woody stem regeneration in check on temporary roads in GWWA Focal Areas, using manual or chemical hand tools so that the forb layer is not lost to succession.

GWWAs will also nest along system roads in proximity to a fresh timber harvest after recent ground disturbance. As mowing later resumes on the system roads in the Northside project area, NCWRC recommends leaving intervals of brushy patches along the road shoulder rather than slicking it off uniformly, as this adds to nesting cover for this species. Likewise, leave a brushy edge around logging decks rather than slicking them off, as these are frequently used as nest sites. The remaining vegetation can be mowed as usual.

We suggest that USFS consider the Crop Tree Plus treatment for routine TSI work in middle aged stands in the project area, as this is yet another way to create GWWA nest cover within a shifting mosaic.

Finally, we would like to note that the surrounding mature forest is particularly important for GWWAs once the young have left the nest. Adult GWWAs move their brood into forest interior upon fledging for food and cover. Thus, an effective project layout includes a mix of young and mature forest in close proximity.

Brook Trout

Silvicultural projects are proposed for the following areas that support Brook Trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*): the Conley Creek watershed, Beasley Creek, and Greens Creek. Special care must be taken to ensure effective erosion and sediment control within areas requiring ground-disturbance. This is especially important for the White Pine plantation clearcuts that are proposed along Greens Creek. An wide and effective riparian buffer should be a part of erosion and sediment control plan for this area.

Wildlife Openings and More

- We appreciate that will create early forest conditions in the project area. The scoping points that only 2% of the project area is in an early forest condition.
- We support the work proposed to create and maintain wildlife openings and recommend maintenance of all existing wildlife openings in the project area, not only those listed in Table 12.
- We recommend maintaining new log decks as wildlife openings and rehabilitating old decks that have been maintained as wildlife openings.
- We also support activities that will increase sunlight to road surfaces for faster drying on access roads. On closed roads maintained as linear wildlife openings, the sunlight will allow more sunlight for growing grass/forbs and help create a brushy interface.

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this project. We greatly appreciate the USFS' efforts to improve wildlife habitats in the district. Please feel free to contact me at (828) 400-4223 if you have any questions about these comments.

ec: Ryan Jacobs, Chris Kelly, David Stewart, NCWRC