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Comments: To Ms. Betty Jewett and her staff,

As a natural resources professional and outdoor enthusiast, I applaud the US Forest Service (USFS) for the development of the Foothills Landscape Plan (FLP). An ecologist colleague and I recently attended one of the community outreach events held in Dahlonega, GA on 12/5/2019 and I was glad to hear about the overall plan and see the level of collaboration that has gone into it to date. It is wonderful to see landscape-level planning and a focus on watershed and ecological habitat restoration in conjunction with the honest attempt to make these public forest lands more accessible for the public to enjoy. Further, the incorporation of prescribed fire to restore habitat for native plants and to reduce fuel loads to (hopefully) keep people safe is another strong component of the plan in my view.

In my preliminary review of the EA, I find a few specific comments that I would like for the USFS to consider:

1. Degraded recreation sites (such as camping areas) along (i.e. within 300 feet) waterways and near wetlands should have restoration priority and educational signage discussing conservation practices and taxpayer funded restoration efforts by the USFS and their partners should be placed and/or re-placed in parking areas and at trailheads.
2. Decommissioning of roads should receive special focus for restoration of native species and erosion/sedimentation control. These areas may be quickly colonized by invasive pioneer plant species. A site specific restoration plan should be developed for those linear projects.
3. Coordination should take place between USFS, Georgia DOT, railroads, and the utilities (such as regional water/sewer authorities, Georgia Power, Atlanta Gas Light, etc) where right-of-way (ROW) easements cross through national forest property so that ROW management activities are planned to be consistent with the overall goals and objectives of the FLP. There may be significant opportunities to utilize some ROWs for restoration of historic native prairie/grassland habitats and to implement pollinator restoration plans.
4. Bogs and other wetlands associated with headwater (first or second order) streams should be prioritized for restoration. The Hale Ridge bog ecosystem appears to be one of the first bogs planned for restoration activities and a site-specific plan should be developed for that work. The plan should include existing conditions, proposed restoration actions, short and long-term adaptive management, and monitoring. Each wetland that is to be restored should have a site-specific plan. In addition, appropriate local/state/federal regulatory permits should be obtained prior to any disturbances within wetlands or other waterbodies. Thorough documentation should be completed in order to note successful wetland restoration practices that may be implemented across the FLP.
5. As watersheds are reviewed for aquatic organism passage (AOP), water quality and habitat restoration under the FLP, a scientific study of the stream systems within each of the sub-watersheds should be undertaken to determine the best places to implement individual stream and riparian restoration projects. Stream survey walks could be done along perennial streams within these sub-watersheds to collect data on physical habitat scoring (by using EPA rapid bioassessment protocol for example), Rosgen channel type, channel dimensions, Bank Erosion Hazard Index (BEHI) among other possible data. Such a study could potentially help USFS prioritize areas for restoration and conservation and identify areas where illicit discharges or other water quality violations are taking place on public lands.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. Again, I am grateful and excited to see that the USFS is

using our tax dollars to develop and implement landscape-scale restoration that will ultimately lead to more healthy ecosystems for us to enjoy on national forest land.

Sincerely,
William L. Medlin