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Comments: According to the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Eastern Grouse Working Group report in December 2020, ruffed grouse populations have declined 71% since 1989 in the Southern Appalachians (Eastern Grouse Working Group, 2020).

The report identified that, "Loss of young forests across the landscape is the primary driver of this decline." The species is identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in North Carolina's State Wildlife Action Plan (North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, 2015).

The best available science suggests that maintaining 8-14% early successional habitat across the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests would optimize for bird diversity, including "young forest obligates" and "mature forest obligates" (Jacobs & Warburton, 2016).

To ensure viable wildlife populations are maintained long-term, it is essential that we maintain early successional habitat conditions somewhere within the 8-14% range.

The 8.5% young forest habitat created through the Crossover Project will make a meaningful contribution towards meeting Forest-wide objectives for young forest habitat.

Thank you for your time and consideration on this matter.

Sincerely, Daniel Averett