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Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the aquatic restoration project and report.
BCH of Blue Ridge has partnered with the USFS Grandfather District of the Pisgah NF for more than ten years. It is our mission to enhance the quality of the equestrian experience while being part of the solution for a sustainable forest.

We fully support the goal of the watershed resiliency project to restore the ecosystem and increase the pace, scale and efficiency of projects that meet those goals.

After reading the scope of the challenges, it does imply that recreation and especially equestrian use on the forest has been identified as key to stream-side disturbances. We question the use of studies done in 1974 (fifty years ago) and 1990 (twenty-four years ago) are the "best science" data points that could be used. Mountain bikes didn't even appear on the scene until around 1983. We would recommend the USFS seek more current data to analyze the impact of mountain biking on stream sides. For example, in one weekend, a local mountain bike race had 250 crossings at high speed of Tom's Creek in the Marion NC area. Is there any data about bike chain grease to water quality?

According to the USFS National Visitor User Monitoring data, 2010-2014 numbers showed of the users participating in this activity, horseback riding was 1.1%, bike riding was 5.6% and hiking was 43.6%. The numbers for the latest NVUM (2023) data show more than a fifty percent decrease in horseback riding (.5%) and an increase in bike riding (6.7%) and hiking (49.6%). We question the statement that indicates an increase in horseback riding. Is there any thought to addressing the impacts of water "play" (picnicking, playing in creeks) of the large amount of day users??

The list of SAARTAB participants is impressive and represents some of the brightest minds in conservation and land management. When much of the data points to recreation as one of the key causes of stream-side disturbance, we question why no recreation representatives were tapped to be engaged in this discussion. Recreationists are better able to help solve a problem when they understand their part in the solutions. We were very concerned about additional recommendations (not acted upon) made by USFS Amy Commens-Carson including livestock fencing and reduction of recreation.

There are many ways equestrians (and others) can help to do their part in reducing stream-side disturbances, but horses do need access to water during trail visits. Developing a "best practices" action plan to go along with the mitigation actions discussed in the recommendation report is needed to assure recreation users' quality of experience is not impacted. Inadequate resources (trail mileage) can only cause users to "go rogue" (riding and maintaining non designated trails), exacerbating the problem. We fully support our Nantahala Pisgah Forest plan revision's goal of restricting horses (and bikes) to designated trails. There is very little stream-side disturbance issues on a well-built, sustainable trail designed for the specified users.

We look forward to helping the Southern Appalachian Forests help preserve and protect our delicate ecosystem

while continuing to enjoy riding our horses on the public lands.

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