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First name: Cheryl
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Organization:
Title:
Comments: I am writing in response to the Forest Service's public scoping notice of June 28, 2024, regarding the Southern Appalachian Watershed Resiliency Project. I am a member of the Blue Ridge Horseman's Association. BRHA's core mission is "To improve, expand and protect existing lands open to horseback riding on public and private lands in North Carolina". As a 501(c)(3) Public Charity we manage the Anita Alta Campground. A campground just outside of Lenoir, NC, with support from membership. BRHA has a current active Volunteer Service Agreement with the Forest Service in the Grandfather District.
Our organization emphasizes the following "To educate, encourage, and solicit active participation in the wise and sustainable use of the back country resources by horsemen, and the general public." We support the goal for the improvement of watershed resiliency, water quality and aquatic habitat. It is unclear at this time what effect the proposal might have in terms of preserving historic and ongoing horseback use throughout the forest. We ask that the project Environmental Assessment address this issue and that of public recreational access.

Few of the Southern Appalachian forests have completed trails and related planning that included formal designation of trails for public recreational use. Our access and enjoyment of the forest is predicated upon the condition of the forest roads that provide access to trailheads, trailhead amenities including water for our horses, and the presence of sustainable trails. In most cases current access within the forest occurs via routes that have yet to be formally adopted and designated by the Forest Service as "system trails".

BRHA operates the Anita-Alta Youth & Horse Camp for horsemen, 4-H, Scouts, Religious Groups etc., located adjacent to the Boones Fork Recreation Park in the Pisgah national Forest, Grandfather District. our organization has been working and meeting with local, state and regional district FS representatives for over 10 years attempting to bring over 60 miles of existing "non-system" legacy trails into a designated official trail system. Unfortunately, the FS has prioritized other projects ahead of the need for horse trails in this area.

Consequently, we are concerned that without comprehensive direction from the Regional Forester's office, forthcoming watershed restoration activities could be conducted in a piecemeal fashion and could result in loss of public recreational access. As such, we request that the proposed action in the forthcoming EA include guidance on how local Forest Service units might work proactively with the recreation and trails community to further a shared dialogue and actions intended to reserve and sustain public recreational access.

Most trails in the Southern Appalachians include multiple crossings of drainages. These (fords) also provide opportunities to water our horses. BRHA, its members and volunteers and understand and practice the importance of minimizing disturbance within waterways.

We recognize that some trails were not sustainably designed. With that being recognized, rerouting or hardening of current trails should be considered before closure of the associated trail system. BRHA supports the maintenance of safe and sustainable trails in our area and continues to reach out and offer their assistance to the local Grandfather Districts local FS ranger and recreation specialist. We request that unit and state level forest staff work with local BRHA officers and members and other trail users to identify in advance trails in watersheds subject to proposed restoration activity. We view the regionwide watershed resiliency projects as an opportunity for these forests and to better understand the needs and desires of the recreation community.

In conclusion, BRHA members stand read to assist the agency in watershed restoration activities. We too want trails that are sustainable, enjoyable and that minizine adverse impacts to watershed health. We are happy to do our part, which would begin by entering into dialogue with local forest staff to communicate our desires, needs and how our volunteers might reinforce our commitment to improving legacy trails via information sharing,

digitizing routes fin the field, documenting problematic drainage crossings, and/or conducting rudimentary trail sustainability assessments and water quality monitoring.

Our organizations point of contact for the Southern Appalachian Watershed
Resiliency Project is David Michael, and can be reached via phone, text or email at: 828-639-1807, davidmichael239@gmail.com

Thank you for considering these comments,

Sincerely,
Cheryl Ratliff