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First name: DeForest

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Organization:

Title:

Comments: The endangered longleaf pine ecosystem once covered nearly 90 million acres of the southeastern United States, but has dwindled to only 5.3 million acres today. Conecuh National Forest is the last remaining large tract of intact longleaf pine ecosystem in the State of Alabama and is perhaps the most biodiverse national forest in the United States. Federally threatened species listed under The Endangered Species Act of 1973 that call the National Forest home include the gopher tortoise, eastern indigo snake, gulf sturgeon, and the red hills salamander. The National Forest provides habitat for the federally endangered gopher frog as well as the white-topped pitcher plant, which is listed as endangered by the state of Alabama.

Under the current proposed action, approximately 96% of Conecuh National Forest will be available for oil and gas leasing. This includes numerous multi-use recreation areas that are utilized and loved by locals and tourists alike. Opening up the National Forest to oil and gas leasing is expected to provide zero permanent jobs and will have minimal long-term benefit to the local economy. The state of Alabama already has the smallest percentage of public land among southern states at only 4% of total land. Leasing the small amount of public land the state does have to exploitative industries is not in the best interest of the local community or citizens of the state.

As a concerned citizen of the United States and the State of Alabama, I am requesting that the United States Forest Service select Alternative C (No New Leasing) as its proposed action, and, at a minimum, not allow leasing in recreation areas, sensitive habitats, and areas occupied by species of conservation concern. Additional oil and gas leasing is NOT worth the risk to wildlife, recreation, and water resources.