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First name: Lena

Last name: Pransky

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Garner Westbrook

USDA Forest Service, National Forests in Alabama

2946 Chestnut Street

Montgomery, AL 36107-3010

Dear Mr. Westbrook,

I write to express my strong support for Alternative C (No New Leasing) in the Conecuh National Forest (CNF) Draft Environmental Assessment. The CNF is a state treasure as one of our nation's most biodiverse forests. Allowing new oil and gas leasing in this area threatens this fragile and important ecosystem along with the Alabama local economies that depend on it.

The Conecuh National Forest is known as a biodiversity hotspot because of its longleaf pine ecosystem, a keystone species that supports diverse wildlife. It has taken decades to advance longleaf pine restoration in the area; these efforts would be directly undermined by oil and gas leasing. Oil and gas extraction has a notoriously bad track record for leaks and spills. This would release harmful chemicals into the soil and groundwater, becoming toxic for flora and fauna. The infrastructure required for oil and gas would also fragment the longleaf pine ecosystem. And maintaining that infrastructure would be costly in order to prevent further ecosystem damage.

The economic case for leasing is also weak. Local outdoor recreation tied to Alabama's national forests generates over \$375 million annually in consumer spending and supports more than 4,600 jobs statewide. Intact forests provide stable, long-term economic value through recreation, tourism, hunting, and ecosystem services like water filtration. In contrast, it does not appear that these new oil and gas leases would offer benefits for local Alabamans- I do not see why there is such a pressing need to procure more oil from this biodiverse landscape of all places. The benefits of a healthy forest persist for generations without risking environmental degradation.

I urge the Forest Service to adopt Alternative C (No New Leasing) to safeguard Conecuh's biodiversity and stable economic future.

Sincerely,

Lena