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Organization:

Title:

Comments: To the Project Planning Team,

Please accept these comments regarding the Northside Restoration Project Draft Environmental Assessment (EA). As a supporter of forest health and wildlife diversity, I am writing to express my strong support for Alternative B (Proposed Action).

The following points underscore the necessity of this project for the conservation of the ruffed grouse and the broader ecosystem:

Critical Population Declines: According to the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Eastern Grouse Working Group (2020), ruffed grouse populations have plummeted 71% since 1989 in the Southern Appalachians. The primary driver is the loss of young forest habitats. As a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the North Carolina State Wildlife Action Plan, the grouse requires immediate intervention to prevent further local extirpation.

Addressing Age-Class Imbalance: The Draft EA notes that the Great Balsam Geographic Area currently consists of only 1% young forest, with the vast majority of stands aged between 80-110 years. While these closed-canopy forests support generalist species, they lack the structural diversity required by a wide array of wildlife. Urgent, landscape-scale action is required to move beyond localized efforts and address this imbalance.

Indicator of Ecosystem Health: Ruffed grouse serve as a reliable indicator for healthy, diverse forest ecosystems. Creating a biologically significant mix of young, open, and late-successional forest conditions benefits both "disturbance-dependent" species and "mature forest obligates" that utilize diverse forest structures during different life stages.

Support for Alternative B: I strongly support Alternative B because it utilizes a comprehensive suite of management tools-including timber harvests, prescribed fire, and forest stand improvements. These actions align with desired future conditions and will create the essential habitat diversity needed to halt the decline of forest wildlife in western North Carolina.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important restoration effort.

Sincerely,

Anthony Simons