

Data Submitted (UTC 11): 12/24/2025 2:41:05 PM

First name: DAVID

Last name: Strickland

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Regarding the upcoming vegetation management project on the Nantahala National Forest called the Northside Restoration Project, I offer the following comments:

1. I strongly support the Alternative B proposed action outlined in the Northside Restoration Project Draft EA. Alternative B is more desirable for creation of forest structural and age class diversity that aligns closer with desirable forest conditions.

2. The Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Eastern Grouse Working Group report (December 2020) states ruffed grouse populations have declined 71% since 1989 in the Southern Appalachians. The report identified that, "loss of young forests across the landscape is the primary driver of this decline." The ruffed grouse is identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in North Carolina's State Wildlife Action Plan.

3. Ruffed grouse are a reliable indicator for healthy, diverse forest ecosystems. The lack of forest age-class and structural diversity is a driver of decline for multiple at-risk wildlife species in the region, including species traditionally thought of as "disturbance-dependent" and "mature forest obligates" that both benefit from a biologically significant mix of young, open and late-successional forest conditions across the landscape. According to the draft EA, the Great Balsam Geographic Area currently holds just 1% young forest conditions. The overwhelming majority of stand conditions fall within the 80-110-year-old age classification. These closed canopy mature forests support generalist wildlife species, but they lack many of the characteristics necessary for a diversity of wildlife species.

5. Urgent action is needed at the landscape scale, above and beyond localized habitat improvement efforts, to halt the decline in ruffed grouse and other forest wildlife in western North Carolina before it's too late.