

Forest plans worry coalition, town

by JENAY TATE AND JEFF LESTER • EDITORS

While some are satisfied with the U.S. Forest Service's Nettle Patch draft environmental assessment, The Clinch Coalition and the town of Coeburn still have concerns over the vegetation management plan.

Asked last week for its reaction to the Nettle Patch assessment, the coalition said in a written statement it is "extremely disappointed."

"We provided detailed comments to the Forest Service last May in a sincere effort to help the agency improve this project," the coalition said. "Unfortunately, the draft EA does not address several of our most significant concerns."

The coalition said it remains concerned about the amount of clearcutting and even-aged management proposed — 1,419 acres — as well as the 1,455 acres of prescribed burning proposed.

"We think disturbance from proposed logging will negatively impact the unique higher-elevation forest communities found on High Knob, an area with tremendous native biodiversity, and have requested the Forest Service to exclude those from proposed logging," Coalition President Diana Withen said in the statement. "Not only do these areas have great ecological value, they provide valuable opportunities for recreation, which is important for local economic diversification efforts."

While the coalition does not "oppose all timber harvest or other management on Forest Service lands, we believe it should be done primarily in areas where it also contributes to achieving restoration objectives."

The coalition said it is "very concerned about the spread of non-native invasive species" and doesn't think the Forest Service has adequately assessed these risks or developed a plan to deal with them. Further, the coalition said in the statement it remains concerned the forest service "hasn't grappled with water quality concerns or the potential negative impacts on scenic, recreation, or tourism resources, and thus, the local economy."

The coalition also asks the Forest Service for an extension of the comment period, citing agency shortcomings with notice and Freedom of Information Act requests.

NORTON, COEBURN

While Norton is reviewing the plan, Coeburn Town Council, during its March 13 meeting, expressed concerns.

Mayor Jeff Kiser asked what has changed compared to previous plans the forest service detailed for council. Town Manager Drew Mullins said he's not sure anything changed.

Article from the Coalfield Progress

When Kiser asked if the assessment addresses the town's concerns about its potential nearby water source, Mullins and Vice Mayor Sharon Still said it does not.

Council asked Mullins to arrange for forest service officials to come back and update the board on why the assessment seems to sidestep the town's concerns.

Last May, Clinch District officials tried to reassure council that the project would not damage the alternative water supply within roughly 500 acres the town owns in the Machine Creek area. Council particularly was worried about planned use of herbicides to eliminate undesirable vegetation in the Nettle Patch project. Also, Kiser had expressed concern about how visible proposed timber harvesting activity would be to the general public.

GREEN SALAMANDERS

Meanwhile, UVa-Wise herpetologist Wally Smith, who is heading up research on the green salamander, said they "were able to share some input on the habitat needs and status of this rare species on High Knob at the outset of planning for the project and are grateful to the Forest Service for involving us in that process. The provisions granted to the species' habitat in the draft appear to be in line with what has been recommended by other biologists and will help ensure that the unique conditions the salamanders require to survive are preserved as much as possible within the project area."

He called the species "a symbol of the Appalachians' unique natural heritage, and we're fortunate to have such abundant habitat for it and other salamanders on High Knob."

SHARED COMMENTS

During the comment period, the district received identical comments from numerous individuals registering concerns about the plans for Nettle Patch. They spoke to worries about harming "water quality, species diversity, and potential future recreational uses." They also claimed the proposal "would increase erosion, risk of flooding in and adjacent to certain timbered areas, and contribute to climate change by eliminating the natural carbon sink that our healthy forests provide."

The commenters asked that the forest service, among other things, reduce the size of the prescribed burns, limiting them to mountaintops and ridges, and to eliminate the use of shelterwood cuts and instead implement more selective cuts as a part of a sustainable uneven-aged forest management plan.