



January 28, 2008

Ranger Alan Polk
Recreation Officer Jake Cowart
U.S. Forest Service, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest
Blue Ridge Ranger District
1881 Hwy 515
Blairsville, GA 30512

RE: Anderson Creek OHV Trail System Project

Dear District Ranger Polk and Mr. Cowart,

Thank you for including Georgia ForestWatch as a recipient and commenter on the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Anderson Creek OHV Area. Georgia ForestWatch is a non-profit member based conservation organization with a focus on protection, preservation and restoration of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests in Georgia. Our members enjoy the many benefits of public forestlands and wish to see them managed carefully and ecologically for present and future generations. The key forest benefits and values addressed by this EA which are important to us are protection of water quality, wildlife and the quality of outdoor experience suitable to the Anderson Creek area. Please accept these comments on behalf of Georgia ForestWatch and include us on any further communications concerning the area. We would appreciate a follow-up response to our comments.

Georgia ForestWatch supports Alternative 2 of the EA and the position of the District for permanent closure of the area to all motorized recreation.

As you are aware Georgia ForestWatch (GFW) has a long history of involvement and concern regarding both illegal ATV use on the National Forests in Georgia and the challenges and impacts within the legal areas and trail systems on our forests. For almost a decade GFW volunteers and staff have been alarmed by the rapid growth and widespread damage wrought by motorized recreation and we were delighted by past Forest Chief Bosworth's comments in 2004 when he included unmanaged motorized recreation as one of four great threats to our National Forests and Grasslands. He stated:

“That brings me to the fourth threat—unmanaged outdoor recreation. I’ll use an example to explain what I mean. Off-highway vehicles, or OHVs, are a great way to experience the outdoors. But the number of OHV users has just gotten huge. It grew from about 5 million in 1972 to almost 36 million in 2000.

Ninety-nine percent of the users are careful to protect the land. But with all those millions of users, even a tiny percentage of problem use becomes relatively huge. Each year, the national forests and grasslands get hundreds of miles of unauthorized roads and trails due to repeated cross-country use. We’re seeing more erosion, water degradation, and habitat destruction. We’re seeing more conflicts between users. We have got to improve our management so we get responsible recreational use based on sound outdoor ethics.”

Anderson Creek OHV Area is just the situation we believe the Chief is referring to. We support and applaud the Blue Ridge District and Ranger Alan Polk for this bold proposal to protect the natural resources of the area despite pressure from recreationists to maintain the area for motorized use. Here is why.

- I. Watershed protection has been historically the fundamental purpose and reason for the creation of the US Forest Service at the turn of the 20th century. The landscape scale destruction of our steep mountain forests by private industry at that time led to such enormous siltation of streams and important rivers that downstream waterborne trade was impacted as well as local communities, roads, bridges and train trestles destroyed by subsequent repeated flooding. In the present these headwater streams now supply precious and necessary high quality drinking water to growing communities downstream. These water sources must be protected. Alternative 2 moves in this direction.

- II. The illegal motorized activity within and around the Anderson Creek OHV Area has been carefully documented by the Forest Service and Georgia ForestWatch (see attached study from 2001). ForestWatch volunteers and staff have spent countless hours monitoring and reporting off trail riding and new route creation, breeching of closures, trail sign removal, area user conflicts and stream impacts. Addressing the later I would call your attention to a paper prepared by Coweeta Research Station on the Oakey Mountain OHV Trail in the Chattahoochee NF. That study concluded that OHV trails have “enormous impacts on water quality, sediment yield and stream bed

- III. sedimentation in the study reach.” See Mark S. Riedel, Ph.D, Quantifying Trail Erosion and Stream Sedimentation with Sediment Traces, USDA Forest Service, Southern Research Station, Coweeta Hydrologic Laboratory, Otto, NC. The study found that a small section of the OHV trail contributed at least 2.45kg (302 kg/ha) of coarse sediment to a nearby stream bed in 8 weeks (1,960 kg/ha/yr). You can find the paper here: <http://www.treesearch.fs.fed.us/pubs/28852>.

Closure of the trail system is a necessary step to comply with the Forest Service’s obligations under the Clean Water Act and other federal laws. The Clean Water Act requires federal agencies “engaged in any activity resulting, or which may result, in the discharge or runoff of pollutants” to comply with state water quality standards and procedures. See 33 U.S.C. § 1323. Georgia water quality standards, in turn, require that “[a]ll waters shall be free from turbidity which results in a substantial visual contrast in a water body due to a man-made activity.” GA R. & Regs. for Water Quality Control, Chapter 391-3-6-.03 (5)(d).

Years of observations by Georgia ForestWatch volunteers, the public, and the Forest Service itself indicate that the Anderson Creek OHV trail system routinely violates this standard. Georgia ForestWatch repeatedly has submitted reports of water quality in the streams affected by the Anderson OHV trail system that falls short of this standard. We incorporate our 2001 report into these comments and ask that our prior comments be included in the administrative record for this decision.

Although compliance with Georgia Best Management Practices (BMPS) will create a presumption of compliance with this turbidity standard, the Anderson Creek OHV trail system is replete with improperly designed and inadequately maintained BMPs. Years of experience demonstrates that the Forest Service is unable to maintain the Anderson Creek OHV trail system to acceptable standards. In light of this record of water quality problems and the probability that maintenance funds will be scarcer in the years to come, closure of the trail system is the only responsible action. We applaud the Forest Service for taking decisive steps to remedy this problem and meet its obligations under federal law.

- IV. The Anderson Creek Area has historically been a popular destination for hunting and fishing in Gilmer County. According to reports from local citizens the out of control situation in the past had pretty much ruined the area for traditional hunting and fishing pursuits. Since the temporary closure attempts by the Forest Service in 2005 this situation is improving. Alternative 2 would improve the hunting and fishing experience in the area.

- V. The steep topography and many streams in the area should disqualify Anderson Creek as an area where motorized recreation is allowed. The initial opening of the area with out a defined trail system has been a disaster and lesson learned by the Forest Service and we believe it is now clear that it is very difficult to design motorized trail systems within the steep landscape, highly erodible soils and wet climate of the Southern Appalachian region. Our highly erodible soils, once exposed and loosened by motorized activity usually do not have far to flow down slope to find a seep, spring or creek. Alternative 2 is the best choice for protecting water quality within and downstream of the Anderson Creek Area.
- VI. Many of the remaining 10 OHV areas across the forest have ongoing problems which will require re-design of trails and ongoing expensive maintenance that the agency apparently does not have the budget for. The agency has invested over \$60,000 to stabilize and protect the resources in the Anderson Creek Area. This figure may pale in comparison to the cost of countless hours of spent by National Forest Legal Enforcement Officers working in the area. These costs are not borne by the users but by the American tax payer. From a purely economic perspective Alternative 2 is the best decision for American taxpayers.
- VII. The behavior of some motorized recreationists is part of the problem. The idea that motorized forest users have a “right” to ride is often stated, especially in relationship to other uses such as hiking, biking, hunting, fishing etc. This reasoning is false. No one has the right to
- VIII. damage public land, period. It would be most helpful if all recreationists would consider their responsibilities when contemplating their rights. Despite the enjoyable experience provided by motorized recreation for some citizens the impacts on certain terrains and resulting environmental damage cannot be allowed.
- IX. Alternative 3 has many weaknesses not the least of which is that it is yet to be demonstrated anywhere on the Chattahoochee that motorized recreationists can control their desire to ride through creeks, stay on designated trails or commit and follow through on trail maintenance adequate enough to maintain legal trail systems. The total re-working of the trail system at Anderson Creek will be expensive, is lying on the wrong topography for such a system and would most likely fail. The cost of monitoring and enforcement in

the area for maintaining and protecting the resource would be phenomenal. The costs to the land and water, to the American taxpayer and to the agency are too great.

- X. Local land owners report many instances of private land trespass, high siltation levels of streams through adjacent private property and even noise levels on some weekends causing one local home owner to leave his home till Sunday evening when things would quiet down. This kind of nuisance impacts on surrounding private property owners is unacceptable and only Alternative 2 would permanently solve these problems.

- XI. We believe the District has supplied adequate support for the Purpose and Need for the proposed action and Preferred Alternative. We believe the Forest Plan abundantly supports permanent closure of the area to motorized recreation and we believe the process to date has identified and addressed most of the important issues associated with a closure of the area. For these and the many reasons stated above we support Alternative 2 as the right decision by the district ranger for the Anderson Creek OHV Area, its wildlife and streams, adjacent property owners and the majority of potential users of the forest area.

Respectfully submitted for Georgia ForestWatch,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wayne Jenkins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Wayne Jenkins
Georgia ForestWatch Executive Director