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Comments:

Please include this email as input to the evaluation of proposed new wilderness areas within the Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests in North Carolina. This email has its origination in the Tusquitee District open house on Sept. 27 and the Stakeholders Forum Council meeting on Sept. 28.

I strongly urge the Forest Service to arrange meetings between Stakeholder Forum members, Forest Service planning personnel and county officials in counties that oppose additional wilderness within their borders. This recommendation is based on the very valuable insight provided by Clay County commissioner Clay Logan regarding the Tusquitee Bald proposed wilderness area at the Tusquitee Ranger District open house on Sept. 27. I believe that the other counties would/could have "place specific" information that would be important to the consideration of land under consideration for wilderness recommendation if they were given the opportunity. I know that Graham County has similar information that could be provided.

Specifically: Commissioner Logan explained Clay County's rural nature, lack of any major employer, 48% of the land area in national forest, need to develop a more recreation/tourist based economy, need to maintain timber products based jobs/income, need to work with the Forest Service to benefit Clay County. Commissioner Logan specifically asked about the Rim Trail in the Tusquitee Bald proposed wilderness area. This area is already classified as an Inventoried Roadless Area therefore commercial timber harvest is prohibited. Commissioner Logan stated that the county would like to see the establishment of primitive campsites along the trail, would like to see the environment in the area maintained to provide an attractive area for hikers/backpack campers, would like to be able to work with organizers to develop an annual trail run which would attract significant numbers of tourists and recreational runners and would like to have Clay County more widely recognized as a destination for mountain recreation without all the restrictions of a wilderness classification. Commissioner Logan also had a request regarding a water source area for Clay County at Muskrat Creek. Classification as wilderness would prevent the creation of many of these objectives.

I believe Commissioner Logan's input is typical of the information the Forest Service could gain if the other counties were asked to state their needs and reasons for objecting to more wilderness areas. I do not believe the ranger district "open house" events or Congressman Meadows 2 county meetings achieved this type of input from the counties. I would be more than happy to participate in helping to further this process in the counties that are within the Nantahala National Forest. I am available for further discussion if needed.

Thank you for adding this information to the "Wilderness Comments" of the management plan under development.

Best Regards,

Jim Gray

Ruffed Grouse Society

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