

## What's going on with the Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests?

The National Forest Service (FS) is updating its plan for managing the Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests. The plan will address trails, conservation of special natural areas, logging, and many other issues for the next 15 to 20 years. The FS is expected to release a draft of the Revised Plan at the end of the summer. Because these are the public lands on which most of the CMC's hikes and trail maintenance activities occur, and they provide huge opportunities for hiking and back country recreation, the Revised Plan is a true "big deal" for the CMC, its members and hikers. The FS is required to incorporate interests of citizens into the Plan, *and the FS listens*. Although the CMC has participated in stakeholder groups throughout the planning process, comment letters from individuals will be very important as the FS finalizes the Plan. So expect further information and guidance as release of the Draft Plan nears.

### Why is the Revised Forest Plan important to the Carolina Mountain Club and its members?

The Revised Plan will set policy and priorities for managing the Pisgah and Nantahala forests for the next 15-20 years. The Revised Plan will cover many issues that affect our enjoyment of the lands and trails where we hike and provide maintenance.

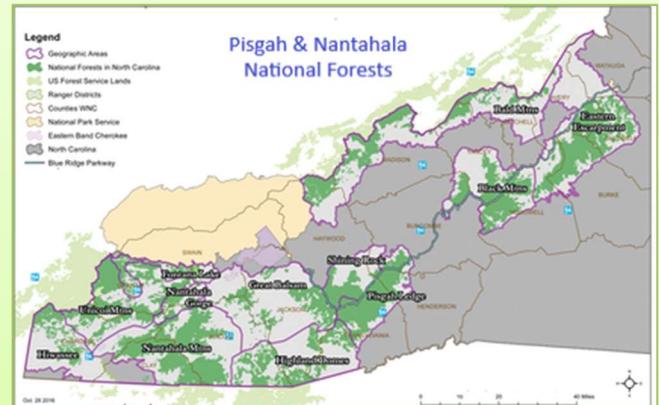
For example, the Revised Plan will cover:

#### *The CMC hikes a lot in our National Forests.*



#### **What are the Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests?**

The Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests are public lands managed by the FS, which is part of the US Department of Agriculture. By law, National Forests are managed to serve a range of public interests, including hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, and other recreational uses, but also commercial interests, such as timber harvesting, mining, and grazing.



These forests include over a million acres in western North Carolina, extending from near Grandfather Mountain to the Tennessee and Georgia lines at the southwest corner of North Carolina. Many of the CMC's activities occur on these lands.

**Planning for timber projects, facility development, and other impact-intensive activities.** These activities affect trails, nearby lands, and the hiking experience. The CMC supports participation of hiking and recreation groups in early planning of timber projects, in oversight, and post-project rehabilitation. The CMC wants the FS to assign high value to hiking, other recreation, and general conservation in deciding where and the extent to which timber projects are undertaken. The CMC also supports strong oversight and enforcement of land and habitat protections during performance and rehabilitation of lands affected by timber projects.

**Category designations of land areas throughout the forests**, which affect future development, management and use of the FS lands. Some lands will be classified as *interface*, which means that the lands will be managed and developed with the expectation of high public use, such as areas around visitor centers and campgrounds. Other areas will be managed as *back-country* lands, which means that the lands would see limited development and be protected for uses like more remote hiking, camping, biking and similar land-use experience. Another category, *matrix*, falls between these classifications, and would see less development but also less protection for back-country uses. *The CMC generally prefers to hike on, and to maintain, trails that fall in the back-country classification.*

**Management of lands as candidates for federally designated Wilderness.** A related issue concerns classification of lands as candidates to become federally designated Wilderness. The North Carolina mountains have several federally protected Wilderness Areas (e.g., Linville Gorge and Shining Rock). Many other areas are strong candidates to become

Wilderness based on their remoteness, lack of human disturbance, opportunity for recreation, and environmental and socio-cultural value. These areas may be classified as Wilderness Study Areas, which protects them from development while they remain under study to become Wilderness. The Revised Plan is expected to include decisions on which of these candidate areas to retain as Wilderness Study Areas. *The CMC generally supports continued protection of such lands for Wilderness Study, and eventual designation as Wilderness.*

#### **Maintenance and protection of existing trails; development of new trails.**

The Revised Plan will set policy and priorities for maintaining and protecting existing trails, including potential decommissioning, and for development of

*More of our National Forest hiking.*



*The CMC is a key maintainer of NF trails.*



new trails. Among the trail-related considerations that the Plan will address are whether and when trails would be managed as multi-use trails – that is, permitting recreational bikers and/or horse-riders to use existing or newly developed trails, which have otherwise been managed as hiking-only trails. *Here, the CMC is concerned that trails provide an enjoyable and safe hiking experience.*

The Revised Plan will address numerous other areas of concern.

**A final point:** The Revised Plan is expected to govern management of the FSs for the next 15-20 years, which underscores the importance for the CMC and its members to participate in the Revised Plan process when the Draft Plan is released, and to work to ensure that the Revised Plan best meets the priorities of the CMC, its members, and hikers.

#### ***What is the process and schedule for the Revised Plan?***

The FS has been working on the Revised Forest Plan since 2013. This process has involved substantial interaction with regional stakeholders including hikers, hunters, anglers, bikers, general recreational users, Native American interests, general conservation interests, timber and mining interests, the tourism industry and other commercial interests, and counties and communities in the FS area.

In developing the Revised Plan, the FS operates under a federal process in which it

will first release a draft of Revised Plan alternatives and a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) assessing their environmental, economic, and socio-cultural impact. Following release, the FS will receive comments from the public – both as organizations and as individuals – on the Revised Plan alternatives and the DEIS. This public comment process, which is expected to last 90 days, is legally required to finalize the plan, and allows the public to provide its last round of input, with preferences for the final plan.

The FS is required, by law, to consider these comments in developing the final plan, and to document how it accounted for them in its formulation.

The latest information indicates the FS will release the draft Revised Plan and DEIS in September. Following receipt and review of public comments, the FS is expected to release the final plan in 2020.

#### ***How has the CMC been involved in the planning process?***

The CMC – through the Conservation Committee and most directly, Tish Desjardins and Ruth Hartzler – has participated in this process from its outset. Tish represents the CMC in the Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Partnership, and Ruth represents us in the Stakeholders Forum for the Nantahala and Pisgah Plan Revision. These groups are forums for dialogue, consensus-building, and input to the FS as it develops the Revised Plan. The CMC has also supported the Club's interests by providing written comments, participating in public meetings, and generally representing our interests to the FS in the planning process.

### ***What will the CMC do after the FS releases the draft Plan?***

Given the impact of the Revised Plan on the CMC's mission and activities for such a substantial number of years, it is critical that the Club and its membership engage substantively in the Revised Plan process to ensure that the Revised Plan best meets the Club's priorities.

To support this objective, the CMC, with leadership from the Conservation Committee, the Trail Maintenance Committee, and Hike Leaders, will:

- Draft the Club's public comments on those issues.
- Work to address CMC issues in Plan comments developed by the Nantahala-Pisgah Forest Partnership and the Stakeholders Forum.

### ***What would the Club like individual CMC members to do as part of this process?***

*Bottom line: we would like CMC members to submit comments on the draft Revised Plan .*

To help this effort, the CMC Conservation Committee will:

- Apprise Club members, via a special eNews, that the FS has released the draft Revised Plan, and outline schedule and steps for preparing and submitting public comments.
- Prepare guidance for writing public comments, together with a template and summary arguments for key issue areas, which individual members may use to prepare their own public comment letters to the FS. These items will be available to Club members on the Club website.
- Organize comment-writing workshops to help members write their comments. Planning for this activity is underway, with schedule details to be set after release of the draft plan.

*Expect further information and guidance on this process, and be ready to submit individual public comment letters.*

#### **CMC Conservation Policy and Advocacy Committee**

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