

**Summary**  
**February 28<sup>th</sup> Foothills Collaborative Group Meeting**  
USFS Offices  
Gainesville, GA

**Attendees**

***In Person***

Leigh Elkins, UGA Institute of Government	Katie Hill, UGA Institute of Government	Tyler Cross, TNC
Cassidy Lord, Appalachian Trail Conservancy	Erick Brown, TNC	Mincy Moffett, USFWS
JD McCrary, Georgia Forest Watch	Marie Dunkle, private citizen	Rob Black, private citizen
JT Pynne, Georgia Wildlife Federation	Tim Miller, Georgia Forestry Association	Ricky Lacky, Wild Turkey Association
Chris Jenkins, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers	Nick Biemiller, Ruffed Grouse Society	Stan Crane, Northeast Georgia SORBA
Phillip Darden, SORBA	Ann Wyrosdick, Chattahoochee Trail Horse Association	

***Via Zoom***

Nicole Hayler, Chattooga Conservancy	Meagan Evans, Southeastern Climbers Association	Matt Stamey, Chattooga Conservancy
Matt Walker, National Deer Association	Brian Gist, Southern Environmental Law Center	Trina Morris, Georgia DNR Wildlife Conservation Section

John Culclasure,  
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

Over twenty representatives of organizations with an interest in the implementation of the U.S. Forest Service's (USFS) *Foothills Landscape Project* met in at the USFS offices in Gainesville, Georgia, on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023, to discuss and formally sign onto the Foothills Collaborative Group Operational Guidance and hear project updates from USFS officials.

The meeting began with an introduction from Tyler Cross with TNC, the Chair of the newly formed Foothills Collaborative Group (FCG). Tyler provided an overview of the day and emphasized that attendees were being asked to either sign onto the Operational Guidance to become members of the FCG or to refrain from joining. He noted that the Operational Guidance had been worked on for many months by a group of volunteers, many of whom were present in the meeting.

UGA Institute of Government facilitator Leigh Elkins led a brief question and answer session on the contents of the Operational Guidance. She noted that the plan was to operate the FCG under the guidance as written for two years (until December of 2024), at which time it could be revised based on the experiences of the FCG. Elkins also noted that much of the Operational Guidance had been based on components of charter documents from other successful USFS collaborative groups. During the discussion of the Operational Guidance, there was recognition that the initial years of the FCG would involve some growing pains, and members and facilitators should come to the process with the understanding that we will all be learning and working together. There was also discussion concerning the need for all parties involved in the FCG to come to the work in good faith.

The group next discussed the membership of the various working groups that will be part of the FCG. Elkins and Cross emphasized that it is the duty of FCG members to themselves identify gaps and seek to fill them; the idea was put forward that the working groups themselves could develop strategies to identify gaps and invite new members. The importance of sharing information between different working groups was also emphasized so different groups understand each other's priorities and issues.

After this discussion, attendees were invited to either sign onto the Operational Guidance at the meeting or have signatures in to Elkins and Cross by March 10<sup>th</sup>.

Next, USFS personnel provided updates to the Mooneyham Implementation Area and introduced the group to upcoming Foothills Project actions in the Earl's Ford Implementation Area. Welcomes and introductions were provided from Judy Toppins, Public Affairs Officer for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, and Stephanie Israel-McRae, former Foothills Landscape Project Team Leader. Next, Ruth Stokes, USFS wildlife biologist, gave a very general overview of the types of projects FCG members would be presented going forward. She described two categories: (1) informative: projects that are directly implementable from the Foothills Landscape Project Environmental Assessment (EA), which USFS would solely be informing the FCG about; and (2) consultation: projects which are not directly implementable from the EA and for which the USFS would be soliciting feedback from the FCG. She noted that which types of actions fall into which category is found in the EA.

After this general overview, USFS Conasauga District Silviculturist William Hunter and USFS Chattooga River District Ranger Ryan Foote informed the group about implementable Foothills project actions in the Conasauga District (continuation of prescribed burning within existing burn blocks, decommissioning of a segment of Tatum Lead motorized trail, and conversion of Rocky Flats OHV trail back to a National Forest system road), continued to consult on the actions in the Mooneyham Implementation Area (information had been provided at previous meetings with many of the members of this meeting present), consulted on Chattooga River Ranger District prescribed burning, and began early consultation on potential work at Earls Ford to stop illegal off-road vehicle use in the riparian area along the river. Regarding the Mooneyham Implementation Area, Hunter noted that USFS had amended some of its actions based on comments from some groups involved in the development of the FCG. Hunter and Foote then answered questions from the group.

The meeting concluded with a handful of clarifying questions from the group. Many of the attendees signed onto the FCG Operational Guidance at the site, with many others stating that they would check with their organizations and send their signatures along by March 10<sup>th</sup>. Elkins and Cross told the group to please send them any remaining questions or comments, which they would compile and provide to USFS,

and to sign the Operational Guidance by March 10<sup>th</sup> if their organizations wanted to become official members of the FCG. The meeting was then adjourned.