

Summary
Foothills Collaborative Group Meeting
January 25, 2024
USFS Chattahoochee-Oconee Forests Supervisor's Office
Gainesville, Georgia

Attendees

FCG Members

Tyler Cross, TNC (FCG Chair)

Conservation Working Group

Mark Pelletier, Georgia Forest Watch

Jess Riddle, The Wilderness Society

Jennifer Ceska, State Botanical Garden of Georgia

Trina Morris, Georgia DNR

Mincy Moffett, US Fish and Wildlife Service

Emily Rushton, Georgia DNR

Local Working Group

Marie Dunkle, private citizen

Rob Black, private citizen

Wildlife/Hunting/Fishing Working Group

Matt Ross, National Deer Association

JT Pynne, Georgia Wildlife Federation

Recreation Working Group

Ann Wyrosdick, Back Country Horsemen, N. Ga. Chapter

Stan Crane, NE Georgia SORBA

Cindy Groom, Chattahoochee Trail Horse Association

Economic Development Working Group

No members present

Other

Leigh Elkins, UGA Carl Vinson Institute of Government

Katie Hill, UGA Carl Vinson Institute of Government

Ruth Stokes, USFS

Sara Gottlieb, TNC

Judy Toppins, USFS

Katie Owens, TNC

Cliff Shaw, Georgia Forest Watch

John Lacoste, USFS

William Hunter, USFS

Matt Walker, National Deer Association

Fourteen members of the Foothills Collaborative Group (FCG) met on January 25, 2024, at the USFS Chattahoochee-Oconee Forests Supervisors Office in Gainesville, Georgia. The meeting began with group introductions and a welcome from FCG Chair Tyler Cross.

John Lacoste gave a presentation, and first reiterated to the group the three types of projects they will hear about in FCG meetings: collaborative, implementable, and projects authorized in other decisions that are within the Foothill Landscape Project's (FLP) geographic boundaries. He then gave an overview of current and upcoming projects authorized by other decisions, including timber sales, road closures, culvert replacements, and dispersed recreation improvements. Next, Lacoste gave an overview of 2023 FLP accomplishments, including prescribed burns and implementation of the Mooneyham Project. Discussion with the group concerning Mooneyham included a brief discussion of leveraging partner organization resources.

Lacoste then provided an update on a FLP implementable project, the paving of Holly Creek Road. USFS is working with TNC to manage the project and are in the planning stage; the goal is to have it complete by 2025. The project will include hardening or eliminating some pull-offs and paving the road.

Next, Lacoste provided an update on the Earl's Ford collaborative action. He noted that USFS is doing additional archaeological assessments, including a week-long volunteer dig called a "Passport In Time (PIT)" project, and if any FCG members are available for the week of March 4-8 and want to join the dig USFS has reserved a couple of spots.

The Holly Creek Aquatic Organism Passage (AOP) project was then discussed. Lacoste noted USFS had not received any questions from the FCG Working Groups concerning the project, and reiterated that the project involved four culvert replacements to increase aquatic organism passage and function. The TNC's Sara Gottlieb provided some additional background on the modeling tool used to classify culvert failures.

Lacoste then described FLP implementable projects slated for 2024, including prescribed burns and Conasauga road maintenance level changes and seasonal use restrictions. He noted that future implementation areas would include the Lower Chattooga; William Hunter (former Conasauga silviculturist and new Chattooga River District Ranger) was brought in to address questions from the FCG concerning collection of data on timber stands. He noted that the type of data collected depends on the action being proposed, with more rigid data collection standards imposed for timber sales. He also noted that, while USFS may consider markets when developing sales loggers have no input into what is offered by the USFS; desired future conditions, not timber markets, are driving management in the forests. Hunter also discussed USFS silviculturist needs and the use of partnerships here.

The group broke for lunch, and then watched a screening of the Freshwaters Illustrated Film *Hidden Rivers*, which sheds light on the significant biodiversity in Southern Appalachia's freshwater rivers, the threats to these aquatic systems, and efforts being conducted to protect and restore imperiled species. Sara Gottlieb introduced the film and led a short discussion after its completion.

Working Groups then briefly met to discuss the AOP project in the Holly Creek watershed. As one group had a couple of questions for USFS, no vote was taken on the project. Facilitator Hill explained to the group that, at the next meeting, the agenda would begin with USFS answering the questions concerning Holly Creek, followed by a vote on the project if desired by the Working Groups.

Judy Toppins briefly thanked the FCG for their continued collaborative efforts, and notified the group of some USFS promotions that would keep relevant personnel connected to the FLP and maintain project continuity.

After a brief discussion of dates for the next meeting – sometime in April – the meeting was adjourned.