

**Foothills Landscape Project
Collaborative Group**

Operational Guidance

February 2023

The Foothills Landscape Project Collaborative Group

Overview

The Foothills Landscape Project proposes a variety of integrated restoration activities and recreation enhancement actions across approximately 157,625 acres of National Forest System lands within the Conasauga, Blue Ridge, and Chattooga River Ranger Districts of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. The project was proposed to create, restore, and maintain resilient ecosystems through a variety of active management techniques that address unique habitats, forest composition and structure, risks to forest health, resilience to climate change, forest successional diversity, aquatic and terrestrial wildlife habitat, communities at risk of wildfire, and sustainable recreation opportunities. The Foothills Landscape is part of the Forest's larger strategy to systematically approach the goals and objectives in the Land and Resource Management Plan, or Forest Plan, in the face of a dynamic, ever-changing environment. The range of management actions proposed are a necessary step to ensuring these public lands remain healthy and resilient for generations to come.

The Foothills Landscape Project Collaborative Group (FCG) is a formal collaborative group representing important interests in the project area. As described in this Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the FCG will provide feedback on proposed Foothills Landscape Project activities developed under the Final Decision Notice for the Foothills Landscape Project (April 2022). Such activities are associated with the following actions, described and analyzed in the Final Decision Notice:

Unique Habitat Actions

Bog improvement actions including hydrologic restoration and removal of encroaching vegetation

Canebrake restoration actions including overstory removal

Small-whorled pogonia improvements including experimental canopy and midstory removal

Vegetation Management Actions

Restoration of southern yellow pine forest on dry sites dominated by mid to late-successional Virginia or white pine

Restoration of southern yellow pine forest or oak forest on sites currently occupied by off-site pine plantations (loblolly or white pine) or failed shortleaf or pitch pine plantations

Maintenance of southern yellow pine forest

Maintenance of oak forest

Commercial and non-commercial thinning of pine plantations to improve forest health

Non-commercial release of hemlock trees to decrease susceptibility of hemlock to hemlock woody adelgid outside of HCAs

Create young forest (ESH) in mesic hardwoods

Create young forest (ESH) by daylighting roads and permanent openings

Creating young oak forest (ESH)

Restoring open woodland habitats on appropriate sites

Canopy gap creation in closed-canopy mesic stands

Create or expand permanent openings

Designate small blocks of old growth

Stream, Riparian, and Aquatic Habitat

Replacement of culverts, fords, or bridges to increase aquatic organism passage and function

Stream habitat improvements

Fire and Fuels

Continuation of prescribed burn within existing burn blocks

Reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland-urban interface (WUI)

Prescribed fire in new burn blocks to facilitate restoration or maintenance of fire-adapted ecosystems or to reduce hazardous fuels

Recreation and Transportation

Decommissioning of maintenance level (ML) 2 and ML1 roads

Implement changes to system road ML and/or use restrictions

Reconstruction of existing roads that are causing sedimentation to streams, particularly within watersheds with 305b and 303d listed streams

Decommission a section of Tatum Lead motorized trail and Milma Creek OHV trails

Convert the Tibbs All-Terrain vehicle (ATV) trail and a section of Milma Creek OHV trail back to a system road

Convert the Rocky Flats OHV trail back to a system road

Decommission low-use trails (Murray's Lake Trail and Peeples Lake Trail)

Willis Knob Horse Trail improvements

Decommission Boggs Creek developed campground

Decommission Oakley Mountain developed campground

Develop and sustain sustainable recreation within WSR corridor – Earls Ford

Willis Knob Horse Trail improvements within the WSR

Purpose

The Foothills Landscape Project Collaborative Group (FCG) serves to independently support the Forest Service in prioritizing, evaluating and implementing proposed work within the project region. The FCG's unique assemblage of institutional knowledge, scientific expertise and stakeholder representation will critically review and provide feedback on proposed Foothills Landscape Project activities, focusing on: (a) identifying and resolving critical or controversial issues; and (b) providing specific recommendations for Forest Service consideration. As needed, the FCG will also proactively solicit additional project information, the viewpoints of unrepresented stakeholders and potential outside funding sources.

Objectives

- **Build Consensus**
 - The FCG will assist the Forest Service in identifying important or potentially controversial issues.
 - The FCG will strive to build consensus among stakeholders with divergent interests for actions to implement the Foothills Landscape Project.
- **Education**
 - The FCG will provide a forum for stakeholders, the Forest Service, and the public to learn the latest science regarding management of Forest resources related to the Foothills Landscape Project.
- **Public Engagement**
 - The FCG will assist the Forest Service in engaging with the public, Forest users, and other stakeholders regarding the Foothills Landscape Project.
- **Implementation Action Design**
 - The FCG will help the Forest Service implement the Foothills planning process, including decision matrices and other tools necessary to meet the purpose and need as the Foothills Landscape Project evolves.
 - The FCG will provide the Forest Service with recommendations regarding the scope, scale, and exact locations of specific treatments within the Foothills Landscape Project area.
- **Monitoring Planning and Execution**
 - The FCG will help the Forest Service design the timing, methods, and monitoring requirements for actions undertaken as part of the Foothills project.
 - The FCG members will participate in pre- and post-treatment field review and evaluation of the effects of actions undertaken as part of the Foothills project.
- **Provide comments on proposed projects and project sites**
- **Help with articulating monitoring questions**
- **Participate in the post-treatment field review and evaluation of the effects of treatment to be included as part of the annual report**
- **Review ongoing monitoring to make recommendations for adaptive management for future projects**
- **Have representation at the annual review with leadership team if deemed necessary**
- **Anticipate roadblocks that may arise and work with the Forest Service to resolve**
- **Strive for consensus of diverse interests on formal comments/recommendations to be submitted to the USFS**

Guiding Principles

Collaborative members agree to:

- Focus on common interests and principles, not positions
- Be authorized to speak for their organization, network, or point of view (if an individual representative)
- Be able to articulate and support the legitimacy of all interests around the table
- Be willing to compromise
- Adhere to agreements on concepts, plans, vision, statements, or other decisions
- Respect the integrity of the group
- Assist in, or support efforts, for funding needs when appropriate
- Honor the complexity of forest ecosystems
- Represent their organization, if any, by signing the Foothills Collaborative's documents

Collaborative members are expected to:

- Openly communicate progress with people or groups with whom they are affiliated
- Present their concerns and issues, as well as those of people and groups with whom they represent, at meetings
- Engage in collaborative problem solving to address the range of interests brought to the table.
- Pertaining to specific discussions, members agree to:
 - Disclose interests;
 - Listen fully to understand;
 - Look for ways to address not only your own interests, but those of others as well; participate, share the floor, be concise;
 - Look ahead—acknowledge the past but don't rehash it; and
 - Be explicit and factual—ask for clarification if confused.
- Handle, in a responsible manner, information and materials provided by Forest Service and other participants
- Work civilly and collaboratively with other members and strive towards agreement
- Comply with these Guiding Principles

The Collaborative's membership will strive to reflect an equal balance across interests.

The Collaborative emphasizes the need to move forward efficiently while also taking the time necessary to achieve consensus. The Collaborative should function at "the speed of trust".

The Forest Service and Facilitation Team agree to these Guiding Principles, reflected in the design and operations/support of the Collaborative.

Organizational Structure and Membership

The FCG will consist of a non-voting Chair from The Nature Conservancy, a representative of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, a representative of the Georgia Forestry Commission, a representative of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, a representative of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and one to two representatives elected from each of the five working groups (wildlife/hunting/fishing; conservation; economic development; recreation; local, which includes residents, government, tribal, cultural). The goal of the working groups is to provide balanced representation of the range of interests related to Foothills Project actions. To ensure balanced representation, organizations may have no more than one representative serve as a working group member. To ensure appropriate representation of working groups in the FCG and encourage participation, working groups with five or fewer active participants will have one voting representative in the FCG; working groups with six or more active participants will have two voting representatives in the FCG.

Outside Experts

The FCG and/or working groups may request information, presentations, or other informational assistance from persons with specific knowledge or expertise related to Foothills Project actions. FCG facilitators will assist in identifying and recruiting appropriate subject matter experts. All information, presentations, or other assistance provided by outside experts will be made available to all members of the FCG and working groups.

Chair/Co-Chair

A representative of The Nature Conservancy will serve as the initial Chair of the FCG. The FCG may recommend a co-chair if desired. The Chair will work with the facilitator to set meeting agendas, identify gaps in representation, assist in the distribution of meeting information, and conduct other tasks as necessary.

Meetings

- The FCG and working groups may convene three (3) or four (4) meetings annually in addition to site specific field trips. Additional meetings will conform to the requirements for regular meetings.
- Members will review materials submitted in advance of meetings, complete any agreed upon assignments, and actively participate in meetings.
- Virtual participation in meetings will be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- Meetings shall be open to the public. Time will be allotted at the end of the meeting agenda for the public to comment. Comments will be limited to three (3) minutes and should be submitted in writing to be included in the meeting summary.
- A qualified facilitator shall facilitate all meetings.
- An agenda will be prepared and followed for each meeting. The meeting schedule and agenda will be distributed to all members prior to the meeting and posted on the Collaborative's website.
- A meeting summary will be distributed to all members no later than 2 weeks following any meeting. Meetings will not be recorded.
- The meeting summary from the prior meeting will be reviewed in the next meeting and any issues (clarifications, other) will be discussed; Notes will be approved
- Member organizations and representatives will be listed in the summary, with information indicating their presence or absence.

Ground Rules/Code of Conduct

Members are representative of a broad range of interests, each having concerns about the outcome of the issues at hand. All parties recognize and respect the legitimacy of the interests and concerns of others, and expect that their interests will be represented as well. With this understanding, we commit to:

- Practice active listening (e.g., avoid cell phone use during meetings).
- Honor everyone's time by sticking to schedule commitments and avoiding "editorializing" in discussions.
- Communicate fully, making sure messages are received and understood prior to decision making/moving forward. This includes verifying rumors before accepting them as fact.
- Be mindful of who is not at the table during discussion and especially during decision making.
- Hold/schedule adequate time to investigate/discuss/etc. Provide/allow additional space and time when necessary.
- Name and discuss known tensions or tensions that arise in the group.
- Clearly communicate known constraints (legal, regulatory, monetary, logistical, etc.) to all participants up front.
- Utilize site visits and other educational opportunities to address tensions, aid communication, and establish common ground. Such opportunities will be open to all members of the FCG and working groups.
- Refrain from engaging in "backroom" deals.
- Air problems, disagreements, and critical information during meetings to avoid surprises and utilize agreed upon protocol to resolve disagreements. Recognize that disagreements are "problems to be solved," not "battles to be won."
- Respect the opinions of others.

Decision Making Protocol

The FCG will make decisions by consensus. Consensus is defined as decisions that all parties can support, or at a minimum, agree to live with. There are two levels of participation: the working groups, which are organized by interest area, and the FCG, which brings together representatives of the working groups as well as expertise from state and federal partners. Working groups must elect one or two members to serve on the FCG (members can be nominated or self-nominate). The FCG is chaired by a non-voting representative from The Nature Conservancy.

Projects brought before the FCG will often include a number of distinct actions. When this occurs, the FCG may decide to request working group votes on both distinct project actions and on the project as a whole.

For voting purposes in the working group, a simple majority of working group members will be required to be present. Voting by proxy is only allowed if the member of the working group sends a substitute to attend the meeting. Designating another member of the working group as the member's proxy is not allowed (i.e. a member may not submit more than one (1) vote).

For voting purposes on the FCG, at least one representative of each working group must be present in addition to designated state and federal partner representatives. Voting by proxy is only allowed if the member sends a substitute to attend the meeting. That substitute must be a member of the same working group who attended and participated in the working group deliberations. Designating another member of the FCG as the member's proxy is not allowed (i.e. a member may not submit more than one (1) vote).

Decision-Making Protocol: Working Group Level

- The proposed Project/Action is presented to the FCG and working groups by the Forest Service
- Working groups:
 - Will discuss/deliberate projects/actions, identify any additional information needs, red flags, and projects that are a high priority (absolutes)
 - Decide upon the working group's level of support/prioritization of actions.
- There are three voting options:
 - A) Support without reservation (no objections to the proposal)
 - B) Support but with reservation (can "live with" the proposal)
 - Option B *should* include comments/feedback
 - C) Oppose (disagree with the proposal; cannot live with it)
 - Option C *must* include a constructive alternate path forward for FCG and Forest Service consideration developed by those who oppose the project/action
- Split votes in working groups with two FCG members are allowed
- Working groups provide a brief (1-2 page) summary document of the decision that is communicated to the FCG chairperson. It contains the following elements:
 - Stakeholder groups/members participating
 - Any informational needs, red flags, and absolutes
 - A summary of the nature of the deliberations, voting, and any feedback/constructive criticism

Decision-Making Protocol: FCG Level

- During a FCG meeting each working group representative committee member presents respective summary feedback or alternative solutions for FCG consideration
- Information requested by working groups will be presented to the FCG as deemed appropriate by the Chair
- The FCG will discuss/deliberate and vote
- There are four possible FCG outcomes:
 - 1) Full Support/Consensus (no B or C votes)
 - 2) Support/Consensus with reservation (all A and B votes)
 - 3) Majority Approval (some C votes; $A + B > C$)
 - 4) Majority Opposition ($C > A + B$)
 - C votes must include a constructive alternate path forward
- FCG Chair is charged with providing the Summary Report to Forest Service.
- The Summary Report contains the following elements:
 - Members participating in deliberation
 - A short review of the nature of the FCG deliberation
 - Vote outcome and required feedback/constructive criticism

Outcomes¹

Based on the results of FCG recommendations, members will be held to the following standards:

¹ Adapted from the Panhandle Forest Collaborative.

Decision	Support Level	Member commitment
Full Support/Consensus	High	No members (or organizations represented by members) will appeal/litigate or support outside challenges. All members will express support for the project ² and work to resolve any issues raised later by non-FCG entities if the opportunity arises.
Support/Consensus but with reservation	Medium	No members (or organizations represented by members) will appeal/litigate or support outside challenges. Members who had reservations recorded may express those reservations if the opportunity arises; however, all members agree that any statements expressing reservations about the decision will <u>not</u> be directed at the collaborative process itself. Reservations about the decision will be recorded in the meeting minutes. Good faith efforts will be made by the person(s) with reservations to offer alternative language and try to achieve high support before the group settles for medium support.
Majority approval	Medium	Members (or organizations represented by members) reserve right to appeal/litigate or support outside challenges. Members who voted against approval reserve the right to express their reasons for voting against approval ³ and may actively pursue opportunities to do so; however, all members agree that any statements expressing reservations about the decision will <u>not</u> be directed at the collaborative process itself.
Majority disapproval	Low	The FCG will inform the Forest Service that the collaborative does not support the project. All members reserve the right to express their reasons for voting to drop the proposal and may actively pursue opportunities to do so; however, all members agree that any statements expressing reservations about the decision will <u>not</u> be directed at the collaborative process itself.

² In media or elsewhere.

³ In media or elsewhere.

Communications Plan

The FCG will develop a Communications Plan that addresses the following:

1. Statement of communication need and purpose for FCG
 - Define internal (FCG members and Forest Service) and external audiences clearly and understand why there needs to be clear communication with each.
 - Purposes are: to inform, involve, engage in discussion, seek focused feedback, respond to negativity, misinformation and rumors.
 - Support FCG operations with transparency, accessibility, responsiveness.
2. *What* we will need to communicate
 - Key messages and milestones
 - Agreements and disputes
 - Reference materials and reports
 - Plans and processes, schedules and next steps
 - Field trip opportunities
3. How we will communicate and when
 - Consider *regularity* of communications, (i.e., annual report, quarterly meeting minutes, etc.) and when special communications are warranted
 - *Mechanisms* of communication to consider: links to upcoming meetings, press releases, email announcements, website postings, public meetings
 - Links to FCG member organizations on the FCG website as desired
4. Who will hold responsibility for what communications to internal (FCG, working groups, Forest Service) and external stakeholders
5. Feedback and measurement of effectiveness of communications
 - Examine communications no less than annually
 - Develop qualitative and quantitative measures of effectiveness

The Chair will work with the facilitators to appropriately communicate to members and to the public more broadly through a dedicated website. Information will include meeting times, dates, locations, and any supporting documents.

Monitoring

The Forest Service will provide information on its monitoring plans for proposed projects, and the FCG may request pertinent monitoring data for projects and actions.

The Forest Service will provide opportunities for members of the FCG to visit project sites via field trip or presentation at meetings to understand how the projects either underway or completed are meeting the restoration milestones and goals.

If needed, a Monitoring Subcommittee may be established to assist in translating the benefits and lessons learned from restoration efforts to future management activities.

In addition, a subcommittee may be formed to assess the effectiveness of the FCG structure and determine if changes should be adopted after the initial two years.

Adoption of Foothills Landscape Project Collaborative Group Operational Guidance

By participating in the Foothills Collaborative, and representing my organization and/or myself (if serving in capacity of a resident or local business owner), I agree to the guidance set forth in this document and will follow such guidance in my participation.