

**Summary**  
**Foothills Collaborative Group Meeting**  
**July 19, 2023**  
Blairsville Community Center  
Blairsville, Georgia

**Attendees**

**FCG Members**

Tyler Cross, TNC (FCG Chair)

***Conservation Working Group***

J.D. McCrary, Georgia Forest  
Watch

Jess Riddle, The Wilderness  
Society

Erick Brown, TNC

Larry Winslett, Georgia Sierra  
Club

Mincy Moffett, US Fish and  
Wildlife Service

Emily Rushton, Georgia DNR

Jennifer Ceska, State Botanical  
Garden of Georgia

Trina Morris, Georgia DNR

***Local Working Group***

Marie Dunkle, private citizen

Rob Black, private citizen

***Wildlife/Hunting/Fishing  
Working Group***

Chris Jenkins, Backcountry  
Hunters and Anglers

JT Pynne, Georgia Wildlife  
Federation

***Recreation Working Group***

Cassidy Lord, Appalachian Trail  
Conservancy

***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

Taylor Hughes, USFS

Judy Toppins, USFS

Fourteen members of the Foothills Collaborative Group (FCG) met in Blairsville, Georgia, on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023, to hear updates from U.S. Forest Service (USFS) personnel on actions occurring in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest (CONF) pursuant to the Foothills Landscape Project (FLP), including one collaborative action for which the USFS was seeking FCG input.

After an introduction from FCG Chair, Tyler Cross, Forest Supervisor Judy Toppins gave a brief welcome to the FCG. She provided some background on the evolution of the FLP, thanked them for their commitment to be part of the collaborative group, and for approaching the work from a position of trust.

Next, Katie Hill gave a brief overview of the purpose of the FLP Environmental Assessment (EA), which guides which type of actions the FCG will collaborate on, and discussed the types of actions the FCG will be hearing about in quarterly meetings. She noted that implementable actions are those that can go forward from the EA without collaboration with the FCG, but that the USFS would inform the FCG about these actions in the interest of transparency and so that FCG members and their organizations know what is happening in the CONF. Hill then described collaborative actions, which are those for which the FCG will be asked for input. She noted that FCG members can see which types of actions are implementable and which are collaborative by referencing Table 17 in the EA. Finally, she noted that occasionally the FCG may hear about actions that are happening within the Foothills Landscape which were not included in the EA but were authorized by some other instrument. As with implementable actions, USFS will inform the FCG about these actions in the interest of transparency and information dissemination.

USFS representative Ruth Stokes provided a bit more context concerning the difference between implementable and collaborative actions. She noted that implementable actions are, generally, those types of projects that are either location-specific (i.e., closure or paving of a specific road) or that should not have significant environmental impacts regardless of their location (i.e., streambank restoration). Collaborative actions, on the other hand, are generally not location-specific, and as such additional analysis may be needed to determine whether their impacts align with what was considered in the EA. Input from the FCG is part of this process for collaborative actions. Input could include suggested changes to the action. USFS may change an action based on this input, so long as the input stays within the bounds of the EA. If the collaboration with the FCG results in USFS determining that environmental impacts not considered by the EA could occur for a particular collaborative action, additional analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) could be required.

After discussing the different action types, Hill reviewed the timing of meetings and the anticipated work flow for FCG votes on FLP collaborative actions. She explained that meetings will occur quarterly according to the USFS quarterly calendar. October will be the “first” meeting of the year, and will coincide with the USFS annual public meeting on the CONF. (The FCG meeting would be during a different portion of that day, and include Working Group meetings.) Other quarterly meetings will occur in January, April, and July. The next meeting of the FCG will take place on **Thursday, October 5<sup>th</sup>**.

Regarding work flow for collaborative actions, Hill presented a template for how action review and votes could occur, with the recognition that some reviews and votes could take place at a faster pace and some, because of complexity or other factors, may take longer. She emphasized that the goal of the FLP is management of the Foothills Landscape pursuant to actions described in the EA, and that FCG members are expected to work at a diligent pace during and in between meetings in order to provide timely input to the USFS. The draft template Hill provided is in Figure 1. Hill and FCG Chair Cross addressed some

questions about the work flow and activities that may occur in the interim periods between meetings. They explained that, at the discretion of Working Groups, for particular projects some Working Groups may defer to others (for example, the Conservation Working Group could decide to defer to the decisions of the Recreation Working Group for a matter wholly recreational in nature). They also noted that some complex, multi-component actions may be separated into distinct actions for voting purposes. Finally, concerning interim activities, they noted that all field trips should be open to all Working Group members, that UGA facilitators Elkins and Hill can help identify and coordinate subject matter experts if needed, and that individual Working Groups should plan on scheduling and creating procedures for their own ad hoc meetings, which can be in person or virtual. Working Groups should take notes at these ad hoc meetings and provide a summary or meeting notes to be shared with the rest of the FCG.

<b>Figure 1. Draft Template – FCG Meetings and Workflow for Collaborative Actions</b>	
Meeting 1 –	Action 1 Presented (draft plan) FCG Working Groups – Identify Information Needs, Action 1
Interim –	Subject Matter Expert Input Field Trips Etc. Ad Hoc Working Group Meetings
Meeting 2 –	Feedback on Action 1 to USFS Action 2 Presented (draft plan) FCG Working Groups – Identify Information Needs, Action 2
Interim –	Subject Matter Expert Input Field Trips Etc. Ad Hoc Working Group Meetings
Meeting 3 –	Action 1 Presented (final plan) Vote on Action 1 Feedback on Action 2 to USFS Action 3 Presented
And so on!	
<i>*Note: this is a draft template; some votes may take less time to reach and some may take longer. This template is meant to more thoroughly lay out the anticipated process and potential timelines.</i>	

After Hill’s introduction, Taylor Hughes presented two actions to the group, one implementable (Holly Creek road paving) and one collaborative (Earl’s Ford recreational improvements).

*Implementable: Holly Creek.* Hughes described the Holly Creek road paving project in the Conasauga Ranger District. She noted that there are threatened and endangered species in the creek and paving the road is desired to deal with impacts from runoff. Hughes explained that Holly Creek is a

priority watershed in the CONF, and USFS has a watershed restoration action plan (WRAP) in place for the creek that helped them get funding for this particular project. When questioned about speed-calming devices being included in the project, Hughes noted that there is a speed study being conducted as part of the paving that will hopefully address that issue. An FCG member brought up the issue of equipment washing standards to avoid the introduction of invasive species into the area, and Ruth Stokes said that while she thinks this is a standard clause in all of their contracts she would make sure that it was included in this particular project. There was some discussion among FCG members and USFS about a paving project at a trail head in the area that is outside the scope of the FLP EA; USFS personnel noted that because it was outside the scope of the EA it would require additional scoping.

*Collaborative: Earl's Ford Recreational Improvements.* At the outset, Hughes noted that although this is a site-specific project the USFS knew there would be a lot of public interest in the project so they made it collaborative as opposed to implementable. The issues that are being addressed through this action are off-road vehicle activities in the Chattooga Wild and Scenic River Corridor (WSR Corridor) and impacts from dispersed camping in the Earl's Ford area. Hughes noted that road closures are not being considered at this time. The first part of this action is designed to block access of ORVs to the WSR Corridor and remediate areas damaged by ORVs. Restrictions could be accomplished by placing large, partially buried bollards or boulders (must be buried deep enough so they cannot be winched out) along the southern edge of Earl's Ford Road, spaced 4-5 feet. They would extend approximately 40-60 feet from the terminus of the road to the high water mark of the Chattooga. Final design would consider visual impacts to the WSR Corridor, safety, effectiveness, and sustainability.

FCG members asked several questions, including whether evidence existed that this practice would actually work. Hughes noted that the USFS has had some learning experiences (such as the need to bury the bollard or boulder). The group seemed interested in learning about the general success of this approach in other similar situations. Hughes also noted that they have had surprisingly good outcomes when they use wooden posts sunk in cement. FCG members also asked whether there had been attempts to bring in more law enforcement to deal with the illegal ORV use of the area. Several challenges were stated here: typical law enforcement trucks aren't lifted enough to get over the boulders in the area to get to where the illegal use is happening; and this is the responsibility of USFS law enforcement and the Ranger Districts have no control over them. FCG members also asked about the potential use of signage to dissuade ORV users from damaging the area. At the end of this discussion, USFS noted that they are trying to get informed about when large ORV groups will be in the CONF so they can educate them on the impacts of their activities.

Hughes then described the Earl's Ford actions related to dispersed camping. The USFS will be enforcing the prohibition on dispersed camping within the WSR Corridor; in this area there has been a lot of illegal dispersed camping. Enforcement will occur after the FCG process.

For the Earls Ford action as a whole, some FCG members stated they would like to have input from the Chattooga Conservancy because of their deep familiarity with the area and issue (Chattooga Conservancy representative Nicole Hayler was not present). Another FCG member said the group should also request input from off-road advocacy groups.

Before breaking into working groups, USFS personnel requested that FCG members let them know whether the level of information provided in the meeting packets and in the presentation was adequate (enough, too much, not enough?).

The FCG then broke into Working Groups to discuss information needs and select members to serve as voting members of the FCG.

The **Wildlife/Hunting/Fishing Working Group** selected Chris Jenkins and JT Pynne to serve as voting members of the FCG. This Working Group said that they could vote to approve the Earl's Ford plan right away, but did have some items they could pass along to the USFS that could inform the plan.

The **Local Working Group** selected Marie Dunkle and Rob Black as voting members of the FCG. They requested that the FCG have a meeting/field trip at Earl's Ford if possible, and include the Chattooga River Ranger District, Chattooga Conservancy, and Forward Rabun. They said they had questions about camping in the WSR Corridor, enforcement, impacts on the Bartram Trail, and signage. They emphasized the importance of having the Chattooga Conservancy's thoughts on this action, given that organization's unique understanding of the history of the area and interpretation of the law.

In discussion following the Local Working Group's comments, USFS representatives suggested that it may be useful to also meet with John Campbell, who oversees the WSR program, and Amanda Gee. Jenkins, of the Wildlife/Hunting/Fishing Working Group, suggested that it would be useful to have the Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association and any ORV groups to that meeting.

The **Recreation Working Group** selected Cassidy Lord as one voting member of the FCG (she was the only member of that group present). Lord had questions about whether signage was helpful or harmful (does it actually make people more likely to cause damage?), planting trees instead of using bollards or barriers, and enforcement.

The **Conservation Working Group** selected Erick Brown and J.D. McCrary as voting members of the FCG. The group was not quite ready to vote, particularly because of the absence of the Chattooga Conservancy representative at the meeting. They noted that they were very interested in a field trip, and it was clarified that the field trip would be for FCG members and not open to the public. They noted that they would like more information on whether disturbances are also coming from the other side of Earl's Ford, what has been done already that has not worked, whether the project would have implications for Sandy Ford, what options there are to close the road (noting that this may be out of USFS' jurisdiction), signage, enforcement, and potential impacts on dispersed camping and other camping from the barriers.

The **Economic Development Working Group** had no members present at the meeting.

A short discussion was held concerning a topic outside of the scope of actions being presented that day: fire notification to citizens. Local Working Group members stated that they were disappointed in how USFS has handled notification to citizens for recent fires and a better plan is needed. A discussion was had concerning the ways that USFS informs citizens concerning fires, the highly weather-dependent nature of prescribed burns and how that impacts the efficacy and timing of notifications, the large number of individuals and organizations that are conducting burns, the importance of avoiding duplication of efforts of other organizations, and the fact that living near a National Forest means you will experience the effects of prescribed burns.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the group discussed the October 5<sup>th</sup> meeting, described above. One member asked that we calendar these meetings out at least a month in advance, and recommended that the next meeting be held somewhere on the south side of the CONF so more people from the metro Atlanta area can attend. Facilitators Elkins and Hill noted that they would send out the meeting summary, the link to sign up for updates on the FLP, a link to the WCATT, and a short one-page document describing the

process for adding new members to the FCG Working Groups. The meeting concluded at approximately 2:30pm.