

Foothills Collaborative Meeting Summary

In Attendance:

Tyler Cross, Chair; Erick Brown; Rob Black; Marie Dunkle; DeAnna Harris (for JT Pynne); Mincy Moffett; Nick Biemiller; Matt Walker (for Matt Ross); JD McCrary; Nicole Hayler; Ann Wyrosdick; Emily Rushton; Larry Winslett; Ricky Lackey; Ruth Stokes; John LaCoste; Leigh Elkins

The Foothills Collaborative Group attended the Chattahoochee Oconee National Forest Annual Meeting before beginning their work on October 5 as the USFS discussed the integrated and holistic management approach to the forest. Three collaborative projects were highlighted – with an update on the Mooneyham Project Implementation; a review of the Earls Ford Project; and a review of the proposed Holly Creek Project, as well as updates on the implementable actions in the Forest. The USFS also provided an overview of out-year planning in the Lower Chattooga (FY24); the Conasauga District (FY25) and in the Blue Ridge District (FY25 or 26).

The FCG reconvened and began their formal session with a brief discussion of the Earls Ford field trip. There was broad agreement that it was well-executed, the actions recommended to improve conditions were well explained and were seen as steps in the right direction. Field trip participants also noted that it was good to see the extent of the problem in person and felt the proposed actions were a step in the right direction. The FCG divided into their Working Groups for a discussion of the proposed actions as Earls Ford. Following discussions, the proposed actions at Earls Ford were read aloud prior to a vote.

Action 1: Eliminate ability for motorized vehicles to operate outside the established Earls Ford Road prism, and onto NFS lands within the WSR Corridor:

- Bollards or large boulders would be installed every 4ft-5ft on the southern edge of Earls Ford Road and extend approximately 40ft-60ft from the terminus of Earls Ford Road at the edge of the Chattooga River (high-water mark elevation) westward towards Warwoman Ford.
- Final design and placement of traffic control devices will consider potential impacts to visual qualities within the WSR Corridor, safety of public users, effectiveness, and sustainability.

Action 2: Rehabilitate 1.0 acres of riparian habitat within the SMZ of the Chattooga River that have been impacted by the dispersed recreation and illegal motorized vehicle activities referenced above.

- The upper 2"-4" of the upper soil profile would be de-compacted using mechanical equipment to allow for reestablishment and growth of desired native riparian vegetation.
- Those areas where illegal motorized activities have created user-created trails and alterations to landforms within this riparian area heavy equipment would be used to recontour slopes and fill erosion gullies currently posing chronic sediment sources to the Chattooga River.
- Seeding with native vegetation and/or placement of appropriate ground cover would occur within this 1.0 acres to reduce further erosion and promote reestablishment of ground vegetation.

The actions received the full support of the FCG, with several recommended additional considerations. Support for the Earls Ford actions is not contingent on the USFS acting on the additional considerations rather the considerations might be future steps to enhance the long-term rehabilitation and protection of the Earls Ford area.

Additional considerations for Earls Ford:

General discussion: On several occasions, FCG members have noted that with the designation of the Chattooga as a Wild and Scenic River in 1974, and with that designation, vehicular access to the river should be prohibited within ¼ mile of the river. However, Rabun County has noted that it has some concession from the USFS to not prohibit vehicular access. The FCG would like to would like the USFS to pursue clarification, including a title search by Rabun County to determine who owns Earls Ford Road, and documentation between the USFS and Rabun County that clearly, and legally notes the exemption of Earls Ford Road from the ¼ mile vehicular access prohibition.

From the Resident Working Group: This working group would like to charge the Forest Service to move forward on the suite of actions to mitigate environmental damage from illegal disbursed campsites and illegal user-created roads within the Wild and Scenic Corridor at Earl's Ford. 2. Supplement the "I-beams" planned as barriers with boulders or other effective layers of protection / security at the river.

From the Recreation Working Group: A soil survey is recommended where the beams will be placed to make sure the ground is adequately firm to prevent removal by the public. This area is subject to flooding during periods of high flows of the Chattooga River. A lot of sand comes and goes at this location, thus the soil here is subject to change on a frequent basis. This needs to be considered in order to make the beams immovable.

From the Conservation Group:

Develop a FLP proposal to address sedimentation, stream crossings, and dispersed camping impacts on Sandy Ford Road, similar to the Earls Ford Road project, from the point it crosses the boundary of the national forest to the road's intersection with the Chattooga River as it crosses over Warwoman Creek, Dicks Creek, and Rock Creek and proceeds through their watersheds.

If jurisdictionally possible, place a permanent barrier to vehicles on Earls Ford Road prior to the Warwoman Creek crossing to prevent all vehicle traffic from fording Warwoman Creek.

- Determine the legal jurisdiction of Earls Ford Road at the point it crosses the boundary of the national forest. Currently Rabun County proclaims to have jurisdiction but are unable to produce documentation clarifying their position.
- If determined Rabun County has no legal jurisdiction over Earls Ford Road once it crosses the boundary of the national forest, we believe the USFS has final say over future proposed projects in this area.
- If determined Rabun County has legal jurisdiction over the road, we support working with county to eliminate or reduce impacts from incompatible vehicular use contributing to the deterioration of water quality in the Chattooga River, Warwoman

Creek and the values of the Wild and Scenic River corridor that may include placing a barrier on Earls Ford Road prior to the Warwoman Creek crossing and propose an advocacy campaign supported by the FLP Collaborative and the USFS to gain the support of the Rabun County Commissioners.

Holly Creek

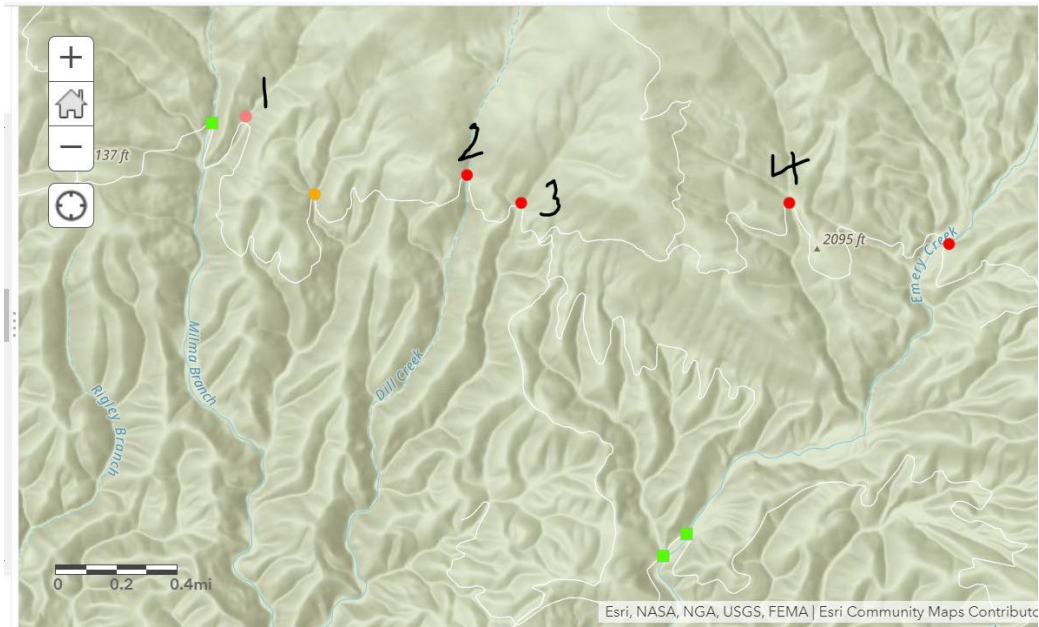
The FCG was then presented information on the next project for its consideration – replacing four culverts in the Holly Creek headwaters to improve stream connectivity and fish passage. This is a high priority at the district level. The culverts are significant barriers that are on closed or gated roads. There is important fish habitat above the culverts. There is a fifth culvert on Emery Creek that is also proposed for removal, but not replacement, and would decommission the road. This culvert is outside the scope of the Foothills project and would require its own NEPA.

For the four culverts that are within the Foothills, they are not accessible by full-sized vehicles, though some road improvements would need to be made to get equipment in for the project. It is not a good field trip site, as it is not easily accessible. A question about future road maintenance was asked and while the road would be better, its continued maintenance is not part of the project. In addition, a question was asked about potential commercial logging and active management potential for the area.

The FCG discussed barrier classification (severe, significant, etc.) and getting a better understanding of the rubric used by the USFS and others was discussed. A recommendation was made to have someone come talk about the classification, perhaps a representative of SARP – Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership and to highlight the aquatic biodiversity found in this region thus why removing barriers to fish passage is so important. In the January meeting, the FCG will be provided with additional information on the importance of reducing barriers to fish passage and provided an opportunity to ask additional questions.

Culverts to be replaced – map accessible here:

<https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=2b8c9b4f62c6467e8e3b542bbdcaf585&extent=-121.317%2C23.5268%2C-69.5054%2C46.4099>



1. Significant Barrier –



2. Severe Barrier –



3. Severe Barrier



4. Severe Barrier



Following the discussion on the proposed Holly Creek project, members of the FCG were asked to provide any information about themselves or their organization that can be added to the FCG website. Members were also reminded that we will be setting meeting dates for 2024 with quarterly meetings in January, April, July, and October.

With no further questions or public comment, the meeting was adjourned.